

AN EXPLORATION OF SPIRITUAL NURTURE PRACTICES  
FOR RETENTION, INTEGRATION, AND COMMITMENT OF NEW MEMBERS  
AT THE WILLIS AVENUE SEVENTH-DAY ADVENTIST CHURCH

A Professional Project

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by

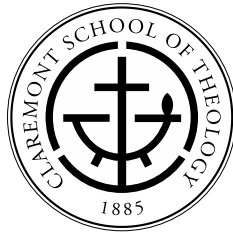
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May 2019

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faculty of Claremont School of Theology in  
partial fulfillment of the requirements of the

**DOCTOR OF MINISTRY**

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## ABSTRACT

This project focuses on spiritual nurture as a critical dimension of the ministry of churches that could lead new members from their early passion to the stages of integration and commitment. The purpose of this research project was to explore ways to address new member dropout through nurture and retention strategies at the Willis Avenue Church.

The project was designed on the understanding that nurture consists of all the ways a community of faith operates under pastoral leadership to intentionally sponsor the awakening, shaping, and ongoing growth in vocations of new members. One indication is that new members who find friendship in a congregation are more likely to be incorporated into the life of the congregation and to be motivated to serve. People are more likely to remain in membership when a church cultivates and projects a loving, friendly, and supportive environment.

As Christ's Body, churches are uniquely challenged to make firm, consistent, growing, engaged and mature followers of Jesus Christ. Consequently, churches interested in maintaining growth and making the most of their evangelistic outreach need to seriously consider spiritual nurture processes for new members. Thus, in addition to being ethical, social, spiritual and missional spaces, churches ought to be nurturing entities.

This project engages the spiritual nurture component of the incorporation, retention, integration and motivation processes in local churches. Consideration is also given to strategies for slowing member dropout. Finally, theological reflections on creating a culture of spiritual care and nurture are presented.

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## LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

SDA	Seventh-day Adventist
GC	General Conference of Seventh-day Adventist

## DEDICATION

I dedicate this project to my mother Michelle, maternal grandmother, Dorothy Ritter, and my late paternal grandmother, Dorothy Means. This project was a labor of love, much like the upbringing I received. I am grateful that I was nurtured, empowered and embraced by examples of pure love in those wise, humble and godly women. This work is the product of their petitioning, the creation of their covering, and the result of their resilience.

## INTRODUCTION

### PROBLEM

Many churches grow numerically through public proclamation and evangelism only for those numbers to diminish when individuals drop in attendance post-membership. The pivotal part of a church's mission is quickly becoming thoughtfully and attentively observing what happens after baptism, or other membership process, to assist first-time guests and new believers to remain. This project seeks to establish a foundation for training Seventh-day Adventist congregations to nurture new Christians and retain new members at the Willis Avenue Seventh-day Adventist Church.

### CONTEXT

The Willis Avenue Seventh-day Adventist Church, which I pastor, lies in the Mott Haven neighborhood of Bronx, NY. The church proper is six years old but carries roots decades longer. Willis Avenue Church resulted from the merger of one longstanding but declining congregation which owned the facility, previously known as *Bronx Temple*, and a thriving but smaller church with considerable resources from East Bronx, known formerly as *Smyrna*. The merger of congregations into one made this church a commuter church, with many members residing in other sections of the borough, but predominantly near East Bronx. Today, the church seeks to advance its purpose and singular mission in its present location.

The church building, the historic *Dollar Savings Bank*, is located at the corner of a bustling intersection on East 147 street between Willis Avenue and Third Avenue. Socio-economically, it is set in one of the poorest congressional districts in the United States, in an area

which is home to several residents that are underprivileged, underfunded, and underrepresented.<sup>1</sup> Hence, majority of the programs, ministries, and services which the church conducts are in response to the felt needs of the community, especially for food and clothing.

Still, the church seeks to do more. Given the cyclical and intractable nature of needs, among and around us, church leaders have begun conversations around how to more deliberately heal and help the community to resolve persistent challenges such as homelessness and rent burdens, drug abuse and rehabilitation, and broken homes and parental guidance for single parents who are often women of color. The church is working to launch initiatives to provide for needs that will amount to a substantive difference in the lives of persons in the neighborhood.

Beyond that, the church engages in practices of evangelizing the surrounding community. Each year, the church makes efforts to reach the community through appeals at weekly worship services, invitations to doctrinal studies, door-knocking, public meetings, evangelistic campaigns, community surveys, and service projects. These efforts occur regularly, and some of these methods account for a significant number of the church's new members.

Though there are various ways we reach and receive visitors into membership, we do not have a system to retain. Currently, there is no formal process for leading people from first-time guests through to committed members. In other words, neither the church board nor pastoral leadership team have, prior to my coming, formed a process to keep in contact with and remain accountable for retaining newcomers or new members. The church does not have a new member class, clear orientation process, or active small groups dedicated to persons newly joining the congregation. Instead, I was told coming into the church, that there are a few leaders who keep in

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<sup>1</sup> Greg Giroux, "Rich, Poor, Young, Old: Congressional Districts at a Glance," *Bloomberg Government*, September 2019, <https://about.bgov.com/blog/rich-poor-young-old-congressional-districts-glance/>.

touch with the new comers. But, beside those few individuals, there is little concerted effort to follow-up with new members to nurture or grow them.

## JUSTIFICATION

Retention is a pressing issue at Willis Avenue SDA as we consider ways we can keep maturing those we welcome as members through baptism, profession of faith, and transfer. Currently, we welcome many new members that stay for a short time but eventually leave. Essentially, the work that we are doing to reach new converts is consistently being undermined because there is no planned approach to spiritual nurturing.

The issue of retaining new believers is so prevalent that it is not only impacting my congregation, but it has become a trend affecting churches broadly. Charles Arn, professor of Christian Ministry and Outreach, has conducted research into the matter of consistency in memberships. Arn found that over 80 percent of the people who leave church do so within the first year of their membership.<sup>2</sup> His findings illustrate the fact that the problem of people leaving church is widespread, and that the window for retaining and integrating members is short and must be done early.

The present situation underscores the need to respond better to those who join. Churches usually entrust ministries and axillaries with offering introductory spiritual support to those who want to begin their spiritual journey, but do not follow evangelistic activity with spiritual nurture. While congregations are placing emphasis on the initial concerns of making guests become regular attendees and members, post-conversion retention still suffers. Our concern is generally related to providing convenient parking, warm greeters, lively services, convicting preaching,

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<sup>2</sup> Gary L. McIntosh and Charles Arn, *What Every Pastor Should Know: 101 Indispensable Rules of Thumb for Leading Your Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2013), 89.

and relevant outreach. Though those strategies are intended to make guests more inclined to return and even join church, the time after such decisions are made is perhaps even more critical to retaining those persons.

Further, the situation is particularly alarming pertaining to my denomination. Although membership in the denomination has grown exponentially in previous decades, this growth is now challenged and showing decline because there are fewer members remaining. The Seventh-day Adventist Church is one of the fastest growing churches in America.<sup>3</sup> Yet, we have lost about one of every three members in the last 50 years.<sup>4</sup> Additionally, for every 100 members the Adventist church gains, it loses 43 previous members.<sup>5</sup> Francy Duran, an Adventist scholar, said that based on the data he has collected, the main reason for the low retention rate is not due to doctrinal issues with the Church. Duran suggests, however, that the need for nurturing contributes to the present situation with retention in Adventism.<sup>6</sup> It is reasonable then to surmise that the issue of retention requires local churches to reconsider ways of engaging people before and after they become members in our churches.

For instance, new research is revealing how acceptance of faith is less instant than once thought, and more gradual. A study of the spiritual development of 500 participants who came to

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<sup>3</sup> G. Jeffrey MacDonald, "Adventists' Back-to-Basics Faith is Fastest Growing U.S. Church," *USA Today*, March 2011, [https://usatoday30.usatoday.com/news/religion/2011-03-18-Adventists\\_17\\_ST\\_N.htm#mainstory](https://usatoday30.usatoday.com/news/religion/2011-03-18-Adventists_17_ST_N.htm#mainstory).

<sup>4</sup> Kate Tracy, "Adventists Assess Why 1 in 3 Members Leave the Church," *Christianity Today*, December 2013, <https://www.christianitytoday.com/news/2013/december/seventh-day-adventists-assess-why-1-in-3-members-leave-sda.html>.

<sup>5</sup> Tracy, "Adventist Assess Why."

<sup>6</sup> Francy Duran, "Spiritual Nurture in the Local Seventh-day Adventist Congregation through the Spiritual Gifts of Prophecy and Shepherding" (PhD diss., Andrews University, 1996), 11, <https://digitalcommons.andrews.edu/dissertations/342/>.

faith in recent years revealed that the average time taken for people to discover God is about four years. Paul Wesley Chilcote and Lacey Warner in their work on evangelism wrote:

The gradual process is the way in which majority of people discover God and the average time taken is about four years: models of evangelism which can help people along the pathway are needed...Most “up-front” methods of evangelizing assume that the person will make a sudden decision to follow Christ...The fact is most people come to God more gradually.<sup>7</sup>

People encounter God and then engage in a process of deepening their understanding in their commitment. While many churches operate as if the road to discovering God before and after this experience is straightforward, this is not true for most. Chilcote and Warner are making the point for greater sensitivity to newcomers is needed, especially in the content of evangelism. The Christian life, and spiritual practices associated with it, requires those we reach to engage life in new ways— ways that necessitate support and understanding.

Churches without a ministry of nurture need resources as they shift the culture in the congregational community toward nurture. We must explore the ongoing process that individuals traverse both to initiate and solidify their religious convictions. In the light of the Gospel imperatives for the Church, we must consider the best ways to relate the way of Christ to new initiates into the faith. We must also reflect on how our church growth can be accompanied by spiritual nurture in churches. Otherwise, the problem here outlined will continue and possibly grow worse.

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<sup>7</sup> Paul Wesley Chilcote and Lacey C. Warner, *The Study of Evangelism: Exploring a Missional Practice of the Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2008), Kindle loc. 492.

This project has the immediate purpose of giving space, time, and thought to spiritual care, retention and nurture at the Willis Avenue Seventh-day Adventist Church. Members have stated that they want to help new Christians, but do not know how to be most useful. This project will help mature members and leaders at our church explore ways to nurture new converts and be a part of the solution. It will help provide my local church the clear biblical foundation for the necessity of spiritual care, nurture and retention for newly joined and newly baptized members.

This project will also provide training material for other congregations, and especially Seventh-day Adventists congregations, seeking to create a church culture for spiritual care, nurture and retention. Spiritual care principles drawn from this project may give a renewed energy to integrating new members. Principles may also activate inactive attending members to exercise spiritual leadership through spiritual direction and greater involvement in the lives of newcomers.

Overall, I hope this project will contribute to making congregations more responsible in supporting the spiritual development of new members. Hopefully, my research can change the evangelistic dynamic in our churches by facilitating a greater sense of togetherness and compassion for others. Most of all, I believe that it will glorify God by allowing us to better fulfill the commission of discipleship.

#### AUDIENCE

This project is aimed at equipping three groups at the intersection of Adventist church ministry. My audience is (1) pastors and pastoral team members, including local church members and lay leaders that assist pastors; (2) seminarians and scholars; and, (3) denominational officials in the context of Seventh-day Adventist church ministry.



Firstly, pastors will find the project useful for composing spiritual care, nurture and retention plans for local congregations desiring to apply these methods for transitioning new converts into their congregations. Lay leaders, in many cases, assist pastors and congregations in administration. They will find it to be a valuable resource if they are sitting on committees for evangelistic planning and ministry placement of new members.

Secondly, seminarians and scholars critically analyze matters related to the subject of church growth and development in preparation for ministerial and/or academic use. The material from this project may be useful to train pastors, and further curriculum development in theological seminaries seeking to teach methods for greater nurture and retention.

Lastly, I am addressing denominational leaders. Denominational leaders may also use this project as a resource to assist in the further development of our fundamental understanding of Christian maturity. Principles offered here can be used in updating our denominational church manual to reflect nurture, integration and discipleship methods. This project will be a resource as the denomination continues to interrogate member losses and seeks to inspire congregational solutions to that engender retention, integration, and motivation.

## EXPECTATIONS

The expectations I have for this project are to achieve the following objectives:

1. Create meaningful conversations around the topics of spiritual care, nurture, and retention.
2. Develop a congregational priority for building intentional relationships with new members.
3. Foster interests in utilizing spiritual gifts for congregational nurture.

4. Activate leaders by surveying past failures, evaluating current trends, and projecting factors for successful retention.
5. Increase attendance, participation, and member-involvement during evangelism, mission, and outreach planning and activities.

### SCOPE AND LIMITATIONS

This project seeks to establish a foundation for training Seventh-day Adventist congregations to nurture new Christians and retain new members at the Willis Avenue Seventh-day Adventist Church. This work has implications and significance for other Seventh-Day Adventists churches across the United States. The focus of this project is on spiritual nurture as a critical dimension of the ministry of churches that could ultimately lead new members from the first stage of passion to the more enduring experiences of integration and commitment.

The project is limited to the spiritual development of new Christians joining congregations, rather than the reclamation of non-attending members. There is compelling research into why people leave church in general that would be helpful in that regard, but this is not covered in any depth in this project. Given the time constraints on this project, the focus is simply to explore and train members to be aware of the significance of this work. Also, there is tremendous value to creating a clear process for new members that leads to integration and motivation. That work is not the subject of this project. There will need to be further work conducted to implement a program in the church, to monitor long-term outcomes, and to have quantifiable data to measure the effectiveness of programs that are implemented for spiritual nurture, retention, and integration.

## CHAPTER CONTENT SUMMARY

Chapter 1 provides a foundation for understanding of spiritual nurture philosophically and theologically. This chapter explores the ways that God is depicted performing nurture and highlight these attributes of God. I will survey select Scriptural texts from the Old and New Testaments in which the topic may be observed. First, it will consider theological understanding of spiritual nurture. Second, it will consider nurture qualities attributable to Jesus in his earthly ministry.

Chapter 2 provides a survey of biblical foundations of spiritual nurture in the Old Testament. Consideration will be given to understandings about nurture in the Old Testament as well as the principal actors and institutions that attended to nurture, integration, and commitment in the ancient community.

Chapter 3 provides a survey of biblical foundations of spiritual nurture in the New Testament. Consideration will be given to understandings about nurture in the New Testament as well as the principal actors and institutions that attended to nurture, integration, and commitment in the New Testament community.

Chapter 4 will review specific spiritual practices that contribute to nurture and retention in the current congregational setting. This chapter will cover strategies for retention, integration and commitment for new Christians and new members. First, the chapter will consider nurture in the context of church mission. Secondly, this chapter will explore specific practices that help to create a culture of nurture in the church, which will aid in solidifying and strengthening those that join into a congregation. Finally, it will examine specific practices that pertain to spiritual care, nurture, and retention.

Chapter 5 will examine the form that my project took. I will explain what I did at the Willis Avenue Seventh-day Adventist Church, and how I went about conducting my project research for spiritual care, nurture and retention in my ministry context. I will explain how research was gathered, data collected, and feedback rendered.

Chapter 6 will contain reflections, summaries and conclusions reached in lieu of my project research. This chapter will also include recommendations for further discussion and research based on the topics that came up in preparation, implementation and thoughtful consideration following my project. I will interpret my findings, propose actions that the church may undertake, and offer some thoughts for further study.

## CHAPTER 1

### THEOLOGICAL FOUNDATIONS OF SPIRITUAL NURTURE

Congregations welcome newcomers by sharing God's Word, hosting inspired worship, and sharing in congenial fellowship. These elements are essential to the ethos of all churches, even ones without developed nurture plans. Thus, what about the daily experience of the church represents spiritual nurture, and, if so, what is the basis on which nurture stands? Also, what does not indicate nurture? What biblical and intellectual foundations are we building on when we think of spiritual care in the congregational setting? These are just a few of the questions that surface regarding the topic of spiritual nurture, and some that will be addressed in this chapter.

I hope to show that nurture is closely related to the concept of discipleship, which is teaching people how to consistently follow God in relationship. This process is best performed through spiritual nurture for new believers. The goal of spiritual nurture is to help others in "growing into the whole measure of the fullness of Christ."<sup>8</sup> The process of spiritual nurture is imbedded in the process of biblical spirituality and discipleship.

The writers of scripture also enlighten us on the meaning of spiritual nurture. The word spiritual draws on the Hebrew word *ruach*, a term which is usually translated as spirit, but also has a range of meanings including "breath" and "wind."<sup>9</sup> The term is broadly applied to humans, animals, and to God throughout the Bible.

The word *nurture* appears only once in most Bibles. The word occurs in the King James Version in Ephesians 6:4 as the translation of *paideia*, but the Revised Version translates the word as "chastening," and uses "nurture" (verb) where the King James Version translates as

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<sup>8</sup> Ephesians 4:13 (New International Version).

<sup>9</sup> Alister E. McGrath, *Christian Spirituality: An Introduction* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1999), 1,2.

"bring up" (*ektrepho*) in the first part of the verse.<sup>10</sup> *Paideia* has the idea of correcting and training a person in the way that is right.<sup>11</sup>

In Ephesians, “nurture” is used in relation to the learning or discipline of children.<sup>12</sup> Paul exhorts fathers to bring up their children “in the discipline (*paideia*) and instruction (*nouthesia*) of the Lord.”<sup>13</sup> Fathers are supposed to “nurture” children rather than “exasperate” them. The sense of the entire injunction is to enjoin two distinctive emphases: nurture (to nourish) and discipline (to educate).<sup>14</sup> Thus, nurture encompasses various care practices and approaches necessary to form Christian character.

## THEOLOGICAL UNDERSTANDING

An essential aspect of the case for spiritual nurture is the character of God as revealed in Scripture. Nurture is a fundamental attribute of God, and key for understanding who God is and how God works throughout the story of God’s people. Scripture consistently reveals the care and concern God has for humanity, as well as the ways God engages and interacts with us to mature, protect, supply for our needs, and keep us in the fellowship of the faithful.

In the Garden of Eden, God is in communion with Adam and Eve. According to Genesis 3:8, the Lord routinely visited Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden, in the “cool of the day.”<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> James Orr et al., eds., “Nurture,” in *The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia* (Chicago: The Howard-Severance Company, 1915), 2170.

<sup>11</sup> Michael Scott Robertson, “Discipline,” ed. Douglas Mangum et al., *Lexham Theological Wordbook*, Lexham Bible Reference Series (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2014).

<sup>12</sup> Ephesians 6:4.

<sup>13</sup> Robertson, “Discipline,” 2170.

<sup>14</sup> Allen O. Miller, *Invitation to Theology: Resources for Christian Nurture and Discipline* (Philadelphia, PA: Christian Education Press, 1958), x.

<sup>15</sup> Genesis 3:8 (King James Version).

God demonstrates concern in terms of human spirituality in his dealings with individuals from the very beginning. Essentially, God's nurture is operative even before the disobedience of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden, as evidenced in God's regular communion with them. God prescribes them rules and is present as if to support them as they faithfully carry out those expectations. Nurture then is primarily demonstrated in the relationship God establishes. Relational theologians believe God designed human beings to be in relationship with God who is, by nature, relational.<sup>16</sup> God's nature is to lovingly nurture individuals.

After the sin of Adam and Eve, and the fallout of that disobedience on the human family, God worked with proceeding generations and their descendants in order that those individuals would live and grow as God's faithful people in the world. Cain was not faithful, but Enoch was faithful.<sup>17</sup> Noah was faithful in his generation.<sup>18</sup> Abram was faithful in his decision to move.<sup>19</sup> These individuals were called by God to labor with God. The calling or ministry assignment is a way God selects and directs persons to foster trust between them and God.

God told Moses "I will be with you."<sup>20</sup> God said to Joshua, "As I was with Moses, so I will be with you."<sup>21</sup> God assured Jeremiah that he would be helped to accomplish the tasks of a prophet.<sup>22</sup> These texts highlight God establishing personal relationships and nurturing with God's presence these individuals as they carry out God's purposes. Nurture is the device and pattern through which God's personal covenant is expressed.

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<sup>16</sup> Karen Winslow et al., *Relational Theology: A Contemporary Introduction* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2012), Kindle loc. 1015.

<sup>17</sup> Romans 5:12, Genesis 5:24.

<sup>18</sup> Genesis 6:9.

<sup>19</sup> Genesis 12:4.

<sup>20</sup> Exodus 3:12 (New International Version).

<sup>21</sup> Joshua 1:5 (New International Version).

<sup>22</sup> Jeremiah 1:4-8.

Not only does God work with individuals, God works with people groups and nations. God interacts through salvation history with Israel ways that illustrate this idea. Throughout the Pentateuch, also known as the Torah, the nation of Israel is depicted as a son. According to Stuart Lasine, the intimacy of God's relationship with Israel is signaled by the fact that Israel is at times referred to as God's firstborn son, and a baby whom God nurtured and raised.<sup>23</sup> John J. Schmitt explains how the imagery of Israel as a son of God in the Torah is critical to understanding Israel as it develops under the watchful care of God. Schmitt says,

The son imagery begins in Exodus, is endorsed in Leviticus and Numbers, and grows to a fullness and roundedness in Deuteronomy. God's son grows through Torah. With the proper instruction, encouragement, protection (both from bullies and from diseases), and with the proper fostering of self-worth (even if only partially successful), the son can grow into a responsible adult, capable of making mature judgments and trustworthy choices. Israel is expected to live, to choose, to behave himself well. With the father's blessing, this son has a future.<sup>24</sup>

Clearly, a careful reading of the imagery suggests that Israel is not a model son.<sup>25</sup> He is a spoiled son; he murmurs and complains, makes poor decisions, but under God's nurture Israel is nonetheless God's son. Schmitt's most compelling words are these, "The image [of Israel as son of God] invites the reader to see the developing portrait and the growing personality of this child."<sup>26</sup> In other words, God's involvement with the nation may foster Israel's growing sense of itself. The nation changes, evolves, and progresses under God's nurture.

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<sup>23</sup> Stuart Lasine, "Israel," *Eerdmans Dictionary of the Bible*, eds. D. N. Freedman, A. C. Myers, and A. B. Beck (Grand Rapids, MI: W.B. Eerdmans), 655–656.

<sup>24</sup> John J. Schmitt, "Israel as Son of God in Torah," *Biblical Theology Bulletin: A Journal of Bible and Theology* 34, no. 2 (May 2004): 69–79, doi:10.1177/01461079040340020301, 78–79.

<sup>25</sup> Schmitt, "Israel as Son of God," 79.

<sup>26</sup> Schmitt, "Israel as Son of God," 79.



Another image of God's nurture in the Old Testament is the analogy of God as an affectionate nursing mother over the nation of Israel. God is depicted as a mother who takes joy over her young. God says, "Like babies you will be nursed and held in my arms. You will be bounced on my knees. I will comfort you as a mother comforts her child."<sup>27</sup> God is "like an eagle that stirs up its nest, that flutters over its young, spreading out its wings, catching them, bearing them on its pinions."<sup>28</sup> God protects his people in Zion for "He is like a shepherd feeding his flock, gathering his lambs with his arm, carrying them against his chest, gently leading the mother sheep."<sup>29</sup>

God not only give birth to Israel, from infancy to maturity God sustains Israel. The nation owes its deliverance to God along with its continued care and protection. God's concern includes protection from danger, raising up of leaders, supplier of felt needs, source of blessings, and giver of the law.

In the New Testament, God is the model for Christian maturity and the helper towards Christian maturity. Jesus says we should pray to the Father that we may be *perfect* as the Father is *perfect*.<sup>30</sup> God is the standard for holiness and makes possible our growth. God entered relationship with us and journeys with us to mature us into the faith. The ways God moved in the lives of people and groups conveys God's heart for nurture as well as His hope for our character transformation.

In Scripture, God is revealed to us as a loving, compassionate, and forgiving God who engages in the process of nurture, wanting to see God's children grow. Thus, God's spiritual

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<sup>27</sup> Isaiah 66:12c,13b (New Century Version).

<sup>28</sup> Deut. 32:11 (English Standard Version).

<sup>29</sup> Isaiah 40:11 (Contemporary Jewish Bible).

<sup>30</sup> Matthew 5:48 (New International Version).

nurture represents the process, actions and relationship by which God helps to establish spiritual growth in the lives of individual believers and the corporate body at large.

### CHRISTOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE

Equally important for consideration is the person and work of Jesus Christ as it pertains to nurture. Jesus in his life and teaching nurtured others. Jesus ministered to everyone, but especially to the spiritually “sick” or unrighteous.<sup>31</sup> He insisted the ones who needed him most were the ones whose needs were not met by the religious establishment. Jesus was moved to help the vulnerable. He also offered spiritual care to his disciples. On one occasion, because so many people were coming and going that they did not even have a chance to eat, Jesus said to them, “Come with me by yourselves to a quiet place and get some rest.”<sup>32</sup>

Jesus had a reclamation ministry and stated plainly that His purpose was to seek and save the lost.<sup>33</sup> Luke’s parables of the Lost Sheep, Coin, and Son powerfully illustrate this point. The loss of a son was meaningful to a grieving father, and the loss of a coin to a widow. The lost sheep was one sheep in the flock of one hundred, yet even a one percent loss was important to the shepherd, as it is to the Kingdom of God to which those stories refer. Jesus said, “I give them eternal life, and they will never perish, and no one will snatch them out of my hand.”<sup>34</sup>

Jesus told several parables about seeds and growing. One scholar says, “The idea of growth is not the point of the parables; rather, it is presupposed as a matter of course.”<sup>35</sup> Jesus

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<sup>31</sup> Mark 2:17, Luke 5:32 (English Standard Version)

<sup>32</sup> Mark 6:31 (New International Version).

<sup>33</sup> Luke 19:10.

<sup>34</sup> John 10:28 (English Standard Version).

<sup>35</sup> Bernard B. Scott, "Parables of Growth Revisited: Notes on the Current State of Parable Research," *Biblical Theology Bulletin: Journal of Bible and Culture* 11, no. 1 (February 1981): 3-9, doi:10.1177/014610798101100102, 6.

used vine-dressing to describe the nature of discipleship, by which the branches of his disciples bear abundant fruit as they are sustained and nurtured by the central vine in keeping His commandments.<sup>36</sup> These vines are trimmed and pruned by the “vinedresser,” or “gardener,” so they may become fruitful.<sup>37</sup> In this illustration, Jesus is the nourishing vine and the Father is the pruner.<sup>38</sup> It is implied that through this process the fruits from this spiritual seed will not only be maintained but will grow.<sup>39</sup>

Introductory to the transforming work of God, baptism was a ritual rebirth practiced by Jesus. In John 3, Jesus tells Nicodemus that “no man can see the kingdom of God unless he is born again.”<sup>40</sup> Jesus was alluding to a rebirth that was spiritual rather than physical. Part of this new birth is expressed in a radical discipleship in which we heed Jesus invitation to follow him.<sup>41</sup> Naturally, the new born Christian by time and care grow into spiritual adulthood.

The work of maturation is only possible as Christ works in the life of the believer. The more we become like Christ, the more God’s likeness is “restored in us physically, mentally, and spiritually.”<sup>42</sup> Christians are to emulate Jesus in life and are encouraged to have the “mind” of Christ.<sup>43</sup> The work of Christ in the believer through spiritual practices thereby enriches the soul to produce full maturity.

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<sup>36</sup> R. Dennis Cole, “Vine, Vineyard,” ed. David Noel Freedman, Allen C. Myers, and Astrid B. Beck, *Eerdmans Dictionary of the Bible* (Grand Rapids, MI: W.B. Eerdmans, 2000), 1356.

<sup>37</sup> John 15:1,2. Compare English Standard Version with New International Version.

<sup>38</sup> John 15:1.

<sup>39</sup> John 15:16.

<sup>40</sup> John 3:3.

<sup>41</sup> Matthew 4:19.

<sup>42</sup> Ellen G. White, *Education* (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press, 1903), 15.

<sup>43</sup> Philippians 2:5, 1 Corinthians 2:16 (New International Version).

In Christ, nurture is explicitly redemptive and restorative. Christ restores God's image in humankind, and redemption places us on a path of growing into this image. Where Adam failed, Jesus succeeded. Jesus success replaces Adam's failure. He came to save us from sin and restore the severed connection between God and human. Nevertheless, salvation includes much more than justification by faith, as foundational as that step is. The topic of spiritual nurture does not reject the fact that all of us are spiritual but in spite of that we need maturing.

The greatest evidence of this work is that we look more like God, in Christ. God restores the image, in which we were created, and we become closer to God: to look and behave more like Christ. Salvation is an act of re-creation; a process of which justification is only the first step.<sup>44</sup> Duran says, this transformation includes the life-long process of spiritual nurture that fosters the growth of Christian character.<sup>45</sup>

The legacy left by Jesus was given through the ministry of discipleship. He taught his disciples collectively to continue to help people believe, trust, and know God more certainly. Disciples carried on Christ's work when they continued to "feed" or nourish Christ's sheep.<sup>46</sup>

Christ helps us to understand the implications of nurture. In Jesus ministry through parable and interactions, growth was encouraged and advanced. He was committed to the ongoing flourishing of people's mental, physical, social and spiritual conditions.<sup>47</sup> He models nurture through interactions with sinners and in his spiritual leadership with disciples. Jesus life and ministry embody and advance the concept of spiritual nurture. Jesus ministry is one of nurture and of retention.

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<sup>44</sup> Duran, "Spiritual Nurture in the Local Seventh-day Adventist," 4.

<sup>45</sup> Duran, "Spiritual Nurture in the Local Seventh-day Adventist," v.

<sup>46</sup> John 21:17 (New International Version).

<sup>47</sup> Luke 4:18-19.

## PRACTICAL APPLICATION

Spiritual nurture encompasses aspects of all the definitions and respective applications mentioned. The characteristics of nurture reflected in God and the ministry of Christ will provide a basis for understanding nurture in the ministry of the church.

In the church, spiritual nurture goes beyond proclamation of the gospel leading to conversion through verbal affirmation or water baptism. It means taking an interest in the lives of individuals who belong to God's community of faith. The term applies to an active attempt on the part of God's people to assist in the maturation process of newcomers.

Spiritual nurture does not deny the inherent spirituality and personal connection with God held by every one of us. Instead, maturation helps us grow deeper into the persons that God at creation designed for us to be. Rather than losing our sense of self in the religion, "as followers of Jesus Christ, we discover our identity and we begin to become our true selves."<sup>48</sup>

Rather than isolating us in our journey of faith, spiritual nurture creates a rich connection with local church community with the broader Christian world. There are many ways that people explore their need to reengage their spiritual core. This is the essence of spiritual nurture. Spiritual disciplines such as prayer, meditation, reflection, study of the word of God, and service are values within the nurturing process. Spiritual nurture is related to the encouragement and training of the whole human being.<sup>49</sup>

Nurture gives depth and significance to one's walk with God and helps us internalize that faith. It underscores that while spirituality is part of every person's humanity, our capacity for

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<sup>48</sup> George G. Hunter, III, *Church for the Unchurched* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1996), 52.

<sup>49</sup> Martha Boyd-Mitchell, *Spiritual Nurture in Developing the Faith of Christian High School Students: A Phenomenological Study* (PhD diss., Liberty University, 2015), 3, <https://digitalcommons.liberty.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=2180&context=doctoral>.

understanding must be actively cultivated or nurtured for it to be fully realized.<sup>50</sup> And, these ideas do not necessarily need to be in contradiction. The spiritual life must be cultivated to maturity which means that one is realizing one's true potential with God.

#### CHAPTER SUMMARY

A biblical examination of God's nurture and the ministry of Christ will reveal that nurture is a primary focus of God's interaction with humanity. Humanity needs the education and discipline that nurture cultivates. We need to experience maturity and commitment in faith. Thus, spiritual nurture addresses humanity's development into spiritual selves.

Furthermore, it shows us that Jesus performed nurture out of a core commitment to the goal of growing faithful disciples who would continue his work in nurturing others. Spiritual nurture may be a means of restoring our physical, mental, and spiritual selves so that we are always attuned to the God in ways that both respect and honor God, build character, and solidify faithful commitment to God.

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<sup>50</sup> Karen-Marie Yust et al., *Nurturing Child and Adolescent Spirituality: Perspectives from the World's Religious Traditions* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2006), 9.

## **CHAPTER 2**

### **BIBLICAL FOUNDATIONS OF SPIRITUAL NURTURE:**

#### **OLD TESTAMENT**

This section will briefly examine the Old Testament to present spiritual nurture as the practice and responsibility of certain individuals, officers and institutions. There were significant figures such as Moses, the lawgiver, Joshua and other judges, who led Israel. There were also those who taught the law such as Ezra, and yet others lifted up the diverse voices of wisdom as found in the books of Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and Job. In his dissertation, Francy Duran suggests that parents, prophets, and priest were the primary nurturers in the Old Testament.<sup>51</sup> His point being that there was concerted effort towards nurture in the community of God's people with special focus on spiritual gifts.<sup>52</sup> This section will consider the household, priests, and prophets as Israel's devoted spiritual nurturers.

#### **HOUSEHOLD**

The first source of spiritual nurture in the Old Testament was in the household. The family unit was the principle place in which children were nurtured and taught about the Lord. In the home, faith formation and transference of religious history was the duty of parents. The Lord said of Abraham:

For I have chosen him, so that he will direct his children and his household after him to keep the way of the LORD by doing what is right and just, so that the LORD will bring about for Abraham what he has promised him.<sup>53</sup>

Abraham, as well as the other patriarchs used this method of instruction.

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<sup>51</sup> Duran, "Spiritual Nurture in the Local Seventh-day Adventist," 47-48.

<sup>52</sup> Duran, "Spiritual Nurture in the Local Seventh-day Adventist," 65.

<sup>53</sup> Genesis 18:19 (New International Version).

Deuteronomy 6:4-9 and passages like it encourage both parental instruction and example. Parents were supposed to emphasize the work of God including God's miraculous deliverance. They did this while sitting at home, walking on the road, lying down, and waking up which constitute the everyday practices of life.<sup>54</sup> Parents were supposed to frequently reflect upon their experiences with God and share them with the next generation.

Centered on deliverance, this instruction was intended to help instill in youth confidence in God based upon the previous workings of God.<sup>55</sup> Redemption was a consistent theme of the education of children in the Israelite community. According to W.A. Elwell,

The original purpose of Jewish education was to teach children to know and understand their special relationship with God, to teach them to serve him, and to educate them in "holiness." Later Jewish education included character development and the history of God's people (particularly through rehearsing his acts of deliverance). Because of that education, the Jews knew the Mosaic law and their own history, and during periods of subjection to foreign powers they were able to maintain their national pride.<sup>56</sup>

Thus, in the Old Testament, nurture is pedagogical. The command is to teach; teach diligently; and impress these words of mine.<sup>57</sup> The entire chapter of Deuteronomy 6 deals with instructing the next generation into the ways and commands of God. Elders were expected to have wisdom to pass on over time. It was understood, that the ancients will teach and inform you and bring words from the depths of their understanding.<sup>58</sup> Even after the tabernacle was erected, the home was the most basic unit in society and remained the place for forming and shaping young Israelites.

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<sup>54</sup> Deuteronomy 6:6-7.

<sup>55</sup> Exodus 15:13.

<sup>56</sup> Walter A. Elwell and Barry J. Beitzel, "Education," *Baker Encyclopedia of the Bible* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1988), 657.

<sup>57</sup> Deuteronomy 4:9-10, 6:7, 11:18-19.

<sup>58</sup> Job 8:8-10.



## PRIESTS

The second source of spiritual nurture was in the priestly ministry in the tabernacle. In addition to spiritual nurture in the home, Duran indicates that “at Sinai, God's assembly and its sanctuary emerged to provide spiritual nurture to the children of Israel who were ignorant of the knowledge of the Lord and His plan of salvation.”<sup>59</sup> Thus, the role of nurturing also became the responsibility of the priest and ministers of the sanctuary.

With the help of the priesthood, Moses was able to accomplish God's purpose of nurture in perpetuity through sanctuary services. The construction of the tabernacle was in accordance with God's command to Moses to build a sanctuary.<sup>60</sup> God told the nation to “be holy, just as I am holy.”<sup>61</sup> The call to holiness is identical to the call to grow because God is the model for human holiness.<sup>62</sup> If exodus is a motif for freedom from sin, Leviticus may be a motif for spiritual development. The moral, spiritual, and ethical ground to which humanity must aspire is modelled by a Holy God.<sup>63</sup>

The sanctuary, its services, and national memorial customs were all spiritual reminders for the nation of Israel. As the priests administered their duties they were reminding the people and reinforcing commitment to God. The priests were responsible to perform duties in the sanctuary that reminded them of their need to consistently follow the Lord. It should be noted that the whole economy of Israel, represented in the customs and feast, were a constant reminder to the people and were essentially nurturing the spiritual conscience of the nation.<sup>64</sup>

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<sup>59</sup> Duran, “Spiritual Nurture in the Local Seventh-day Adventist,” 43.

<sup>60</sup> Exodus 25:8.

<sup>61</sup> Leviticus 11:44-45 (Contemporary English Version).

<sup>62</sup> William Harold Grant, Magdala Thompson, and Thomas E. Clarke, *From Image to Likeness a Jungian Path in the Gospel Journey* (Ramsey, NJ: Paulist Press, 1983), 9-10.

<sup>63</sup> Leviticus 11:44-45.

<sup>64</sup> Duran, “Spiritual Nurture in the Local Seventh-day Adventist,” 46-47, 146.

Malachi stresses the need for the priest saying, “For the priest's lips should keep knowledge, and they should seek the law at his mouth: for he is the messenger of the LORD of hosts.”<sup>65</sup> And Jeremiah indicated that “the law [instruction] shall not perish from the priest.”<sup>66</sup>

## PROPHETS

The third source of spiritual nurture was the prophetic ministry offered to all the people. Prophets and priests held some overlapping duties because it may be noted that “most of the prophets were also priests or belonged to the priesthood family.”<sup>67</sup> Aaron, Moses, Samuel, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel were each prophet belonging to the priestly lineage. Thus, they functioned as both prophet and priest. Prophets provided the connection between God and the people. The people turned to the prophets to hear, thus says the Lord. And Jehoshaphat said, “Is there no prophet of the LORD here, through whom we may inquire of the LORD?”<sup>68</sup> The prophet Amos declared, “For the Lord GOD does nothing without revealing his secret to his servants the prophets.”<sup>69</sup> The ministry of the prophets included: restoration, spiritual revival and reform, intercession, and teaching.

## CHAPTER SUMMARY

In summary, though God was the ultimate nurturer of God’s people, the faithful community of Israel used various means including persons and institutions, formal and informal, to supply nurture. The Old Testament community of faith was concerned with spiritual nurture, and the entire way of life along with its institutions supported integration and commitment. Households, prophets, priests, and Israel herself were all involved as figures of nurture. Every

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<sup>65</sup> Malachi 2:7 (King James Version).

<sup>66</sup> Jeremiah 18:18 (King James Version).

<sup>67</sup> Duran, “Spiritual Nurture in the Local Seventh-day Adventist,” 21.

<sup>68</sup> 2 Kings 3:11 (King James Version).

<sup>69</sup> Amos 3:7 (King James Version).

aspect of Jewish life “either the family-church in the patriarchal era or the assembly-church after Sinai was [intended for the spiritual nurture] of the people of Israel.”<sup>70</sup> These nurturers made it possible for young and older members of the congregation to embody consistently the character and purposes of Israel’s God, namely faith, dependence on God and holiness.

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<sup>70</sup> Duran, “Spiritual Nurture in the Local Seventh-day Adventist,” 47.

## **CHAPTER 3:**

### **BIBLICAL FOUNDATIONS OF SPIRITUAL NURTURE:**

#### **NEW TESTAMENT**

“The believer is brought to its bosom to be nurtured spiritually throughout his or her life span, and to become an instrument of nurture for others. Through the church, God intends to undo the effect that sin has had on humanity's spiritual dimension by drawing people into a loving relationship with Christ, and then transforming them into His likeness.” -Francy Duran<sup>71</sup>

#### **HOUSEHOLD**

As seen in the Old Testament stories of ancient Israel, so also with the early church described in the New Testament, the household was the primary place of worship and nurture. Parents were the first source of nurture. Jews in the first century were aware of the nurture responsibilities prescribed in the Old Testament and would have practiced them in the same way. The New Testament community had a fundamental understanding of the role of parents passed down from their ancestors. New Testament writers express similar ideas regarding children respecting their parents, and parents' nurturing responsibility to their own children.<sup>72</sup>

The family was the closest unit in first century Jewish society. The family occupied a role that was deserving of loyalty.<sup>73</sup> In fact, Jesus condemns the Pharisees for their disregard of the law respecting parents.<sup>74</sup> The parent-child relationship was known as in the nurture of children.<sup>75</sup>

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<sup>71</sup> Duran, “Spiritual Nurture in the Local Seventh-day Adventist,” 5.

<sup>72</sup> Compare Matthew 15:4 with Leviticus 19:3, and compare Luke 2:40, 52 with 1 Samuel 2:26, Proverbs 3:4.

<sup>73</sup> Matthew 12:46-50.

<sup>74</sup> Mark 7:11-12.

<sup>75</sup> Ephesians 6:4.

Jesus was nurtured by his parents Mary and Joseph.<sup>76</sup> Timothy was nurtured by his grandmother, Lois, and mother, Eunice.<sup>77</sup>

In addition to the natural family, Jesus introduces the spiritual family as a source of nurture. Jesus was once told that his mother and brothers were outside waiting for him.<sup>78</sup> Jesus looked at the disciples and said those who do the will of the Father are brothers and sisters.<sup>79</sup> It is evident that the family dynamic was preserved in the Christian church. Paul too describes the church as a family in Ephesians. Paul commanded Christian families to understand the Church as a family and respect household codes including the ones for nurture.<sup>80</sup>

#### RABBI: TEACHER

The second source of nurture in the New Testament was the rabbi. The rabbi used a teaching model known best as discipleship. Every rabbi had devotees called disciples. A disciple is defined as a learner, a pupil, or one who comes to be taught. A disciple was an apprentice or follower of a religious teacher like Jesus. A disciple is a “follower who accepts and assists in spreading the doctrine of another.”<sup>81</sup>

While primarily we think in terms of Jesus and his disciples, the first century had several rabbis and their devotees, otherwise known as disciples. You will recall that John the Baptist also had disciples.<sup>82</sup> In the New Testament, this relationship nurtured those seeking to know more and trained disciples and would-be masters.

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<sup>76</sup> Luke 2: 51,52.

<sup>77</sup> 2 Timothy 1:5.

<sup>78</sup> Mark 3:31.

<sup>79</sup> Mark 3:33-34.

<sup>80</sup> Ephesians 6.

<sup>81</sup> Anderson, *Partnering with Pastors & Church Leaders*, Kindle loc. 417.

<sup>82</sup> John 1:35, Acts 19:1-4.

The Twelve disciples followed Jesus teachings and imitated His life in their own. Not only did those individuals, and others become disciples of Jesus, they were also commanded by Jesus to make other disciples. Thus, the disciples were sure to train other disciples.

The Gospels shed light on the role of disciples to nurture. Matthew 28:19-20 says that they were to make disciples by preaching and teaching. This was Jesus last speech to this close group of Twelve in Matthew's account in which Jesus communicated his desire for them to teach, baptize and teach again. The goal of discipleship was transformation. In other words, reaching people with the Gospel brings them "out of the world but teaching them the Word gets the world out of them."<sup>83</sup> Both are needed to form devoted followers of Christ. Lonnie E.

Anderson says,

Serving as a disciple to others is the activity in which maturing believers invest themselves, for a particular period of time, in new believers in order to help them grow in the faith; until they can walk by themselves, until you can see them walking in the worship service, church school, ministry meeting, and a bible class with a phone call or reminder, until you witness them walking in the will of God; walking with others to evangelize; and walking others through that same process they once walked.<sup>84</sup>

The disciples of Jesus were a source of spiritual nurture to the countless people Jesus encountered. They were prepared by Jesus to make more devoted believers in Christ by being present with them as Jesus had been with them.

Nowhere is the command to nurture so clear as John 21:15-17. Three times Jesus ask Peter, "do you love me?"<sup>85</sup> Assuming the answer is yes, Jesus follows by saying, "feed my sheep."<sup>86</sup> The sheep or flock are those who belong to Jesus. Jesus ask Peter to promise that he

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<sup>83</sup> Anderson, *Partnering with Pastors & Church Leaders*, Kindle loc. 428.

<sup>84</sup> Anderson, *Partnering with Pastors & Church Leaders*, Kindle loc. 896.

<sup>85</sup> John 21:15, 16, 17 (New International Version).

<sup>86</sup> John 21:15, 16, 17 (New International Version).

will take care of the those for who Christ is their Shepherd. Peter was entrusted with the responsibility of feeding a nurturing act God's people. Joseph Webb says,

By way of a challenge, let me point to an instance that happened not long after Jesus' resurrection. In John 21:15–17, Jesus asked Peter the same question three times: "Do you love Me?" In verse 16, in response to Peter's affirmation of love, Jesus told him to, "Tend My sheep." Can we accept this task given to Peter as a part of the modern church's commission? If so, tending sheep is much more than supplying food, it also includes everything involved in watching over and caring for them. The idea that caring just means feeding has led to the belief that only the pastor is identified as the shepherd. Only as the church members realize and accept this commission and rise to the challenge, will new members, and some not so new, be incorporated.<sup>87</sup>

Peter was to be responsible for the spiritual care of this new group of acolytes. Just as he was responsible, the task of nurture is appropriate as we foster such attitudes in congregations today. Discipleship will continue to be the undercurrent for all nurture practices in the New Testament. It is the foundation for further attitudes concerning growth for Christians. Discipleship was the stage on which apostolic instruction was founded.

### *Apostles*

Apostles were another source of nurture in the development of the forming Christian church, principally in the New Testament books of Acts and in the Epistles. The apostolic church is unique because it spread Christianity outside of Palestine and the surrounding areas wherein Jesus ministered. As Christianity spread, with it spread the reputation and role of the apostles, literally, those who Jesus sent.

The apostles fulfilled the mandate to grow believers from the infancy of conversion to the maturity of committed Christians. The New Testament frequently highlights the need for

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<sup>87</sup> Joseph A. Webb, "Another Look at the Back Door," *Ministry: International Journal for Pastors*, October 2009, <https://www.ministrymagazine.org/archive/2009/10/another-look-at-the-back-door>.

spiritual growth. This is the process of becoming more solidified in their faith experience. Believers are described as new born babes, but they are not to remain that way. In their infancy, the writers of Scripture emphasized the need to hold on to the sincerity of the word of God.<sup>88</sup>

The work of the Apostles had a profound effect on the spirituality of the early Christians as well as the numeric growth of the church. The book of Acts testifies that “they devoted themselves to the apostles teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer.”<sup>89</sup> These new Christians were “very desirous of” having the apostles teach them.<sup>90</sup> The apostles’ teaching referred here in Acts likely comprised “an account of Jesus’ life and ministry, his ethical and practical teachings, warnings about persecution and false teaching, and the Christocentric Old Testament hermeneutic. But, at its center was the gospel message.”<sup>91</sup>

Jude urged Christians to “contend earnestly for the faith which was once for all handed down to the saints.”<sup>92</sup> Some scholars conclude that Jude must be dated to the Second Century to a time when the Christian faith had evolved, while others say no compelling reason exists to locate Jude’s reference to the “faith once for all handed down” outside of the apostolic period.<sup>93</sup> In either case, this verse suggests the people handed the faith (teachings) they were given to those who passed it on to others. All this point to the impact of the apostles.

Apostles took up roles of nurturing new believers often emphasizing the need for spiritual growth. Peter encouraged his audience to “grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and

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<sup>88</sup> 1 Peter 2:2.

<sup>89</sup> Acts 2:42 (New International Version).

<sup>90</sup> B. M. Newman and E. A. Nida, *A Handbook on the Acts of the Apostles* (New York: United Bible Societies, 1972), 63.

<sup>91</sup> William J. Larkin Jr., *Acts*, Volume 5, ed. Grant R. Osbourne, The IVP New Testament Commentary Series (Westmont, IL: IVP Academic, 1995), Acts 2:42, Logos Software.

<sup>92</sup> Jude 3 (New American Standard Bible).

<sup>93</sup> Larkin, *Acts*, Acts 2:42.



Savior Jesus Christ. To Him be the glory both now and forever. Amen.”<sup>94</sup> Peter taught new Christians how to deepen their faith. James tells them trials produces patience and endurance. He urges them to remain steadfast and to “let endurance have its full effect, so that you may be mature and complete, lacking in nothing.”<sup>95</sup>

Peter and James’s writings attest to the importance of growth and the role played by the Apostles in helping nurture the congregations. These Scriptures demonstrate the writers took responsibility for feeding the fledgling Christian community and encouraged them. The church was missional. The apostle Peter said it best when he said, “But ye are a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, and holy nation, a peculiar people; that ye may show forth the praises of Him who hath called you out of darkness into His marvelous light.”<sup>96</sup> Peter distinguished both the identity and responsibility of God’s church (*ekklesia*).

Paul nurtured congregations as well, and mentored people. The Apostle to the Gentiles, Paul is well known for his ministry to among non-Jews.<sup>97</sup> The challenge associated with the ministry of Paul is that since Paul is addressing Gentile audiences or perhaps mixed Jew-Gentile audiences there is a need for further clarity regarding being rooted in Christ and an even greater attention to nurturing individuals whose initial religious heritage is not Jewish but Roman or Greek which was pagan and polytheistic, in some cases, centered around worshipping the emperor. The influx of Gentiles in the Church, which had been so deeply Jewish, made it

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<sup>94</sup> 2 Peter 3:18 (New International Version).

<sup>95</sup> James 1:4 (New Revised Standard Version).

<sup>96</sup> 1 Peter 2:9 (King James Version).

<sup>97</sup> F. F. Bruce, *Paul & His Converts: How Paul Nurtured the Churches He Planted* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1985), 11.

necessary to take special teaching and training to lead them towards spiritual growth. Paul advocated those with Jewish roots not make it difficult for gentiles to join the Christian church.<sup>98</sup>

Paul nurtured new believers as a planter, a father, and a role model.<sup>99</sup> Also, Paul saw himself as a “nurse” to the church.<sup>100</sup> On occasion, he wrote out of grief and sadness from a deep love for the people over whom he labored.<sup>101</sup>

In addition to working on behalf of the church the apostles worked directly with mentees who they nurtured. Barnabas mentored Paul early in his Christian journey. Peter mentored Mark. Paul mentored Timothy, Silas, and Luke. These relationships were forged by a culture of discipleship and ministry partnerships and furthered by supportive spiritual networks.

The apostle Paul acknowledges that while he planted, and Apollos watered, God gave the increase<sup>102</sup> Thus, spiritual nurture comes from God who invites human participation in the work. Paul, Apollos, Peter, James and others played crucial roles at different times to nurture and retain convert, and success came from God.

#### CLERGY: LOCAL CONGREGATIONAL LEADERS

As the Gospel was proclaimed, churches were founded in the cities of the Greco-Roman world. The multiplication of the church produced the need to establish a formalized approach to leadership in the cities where churches were planted. The next source of nurture were local church leaders. For example, deacons were chosen to assist the Greek widows in order for the apostles to focus on the proclamation of the word.<sup>103</sup>

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<sup>98</sup> Acts 15:19.

<sup>99</sup> 1 Corinthians 3:16, 1 Corinthians 4:15, 1 Timothy 1:2, 1 Corinthians 11:1

<sup>100</sup> Walter A. Elwell and Barry J. Beitzel, “Trades and Occupations,” *Baker Encyclopedia of the Bible* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1988), 2088.

<sup>101</sup> 2 Corinthians 2:4.

<sup>102</sup> 1 Corinthians 3:16 (King James Version).

<sup>103</sup> Acts 6:1-7.

Local church leadership also included the bishop or overseer, the elder, and the pastor. In the New Testament, leadership is a function of the elder or presbyter to equip the saints.<sup>104</sup> Spiritual development does not happen haphazardly. All of these functions and especially the bishop and deacon required spiritual maturity because the assumption was that those persons would be in a relationship of nourishment to the congregation.<sup>105</sup>

The purpose of the pastor and bishop relative to their title was to shepherd and oversee. These persons were entrusted with the spiritual care of the people in their flock. Speaking of such persons the writer of Hebrews says, “Obey them that have the rule over you, and submit yourselves: for they watch for your souls, as they that must give account, that they may do it with joy, and not with grief: for that is unprofitable for you.”<sup>106</sup>

#### LAITY: PARTICIPATION IN CONGREGATIONS

Clergy were not the only ones to perform the work of nurture. According to Peter, all believers are part of the royal priesthood, and therefore all ministers.<sup>107</sup> In fact the purpose of the pastor and teacher is to equip the growing, maturing believers to do the work of ministry.<sup>108</sup> In other words, ministry was also the shared responsibility of the entire congregation. This idea is enriched by the further idea that spiritual gifts are endowed in the body of Christ for use together.<sup>109</sup> The gifts are to build up the body of Church for the express purpose of making mature Christians.<sup>110</sup>

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<sup>104</sup> Ephesians 4:12.

<sup>105</sup> 1 Timothy 3:1-13.

<sup>106</sup> Hebrews 13:17 (King James Version).

<sup>107</sup> 1 Peter 2:9.

<sup>108</sup> Ephesians 4:11.

<sup>109</sup> Ephesians 4:16.

<sup>110</sup> 1 Corinthians 14:12.

In the decades following the Savior's death and resurrection, the faith of Jesus multiplied—not only by increasing within believers as they received apostolic instruction also by spreading from one person to another.<sup>111</sup> The work of nurture cannot be done by a select few. So, while we see examples of nurture in Scripture, it happens within the context of a community embracing this concept of nurture.

According to Ephesians, the gifts of the Holy Spirit to foster unity and growth in the Christian community. Conformity to Christ entails participating in Christ's mission and walking in newness of life. The new life in Christ is to replace the old as the believer joins the ongoing process of maturity with the help of the local community. Ephesians 4:11-13 and 15-16 explain the growth in the context of community:

And he gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the shepherds and teachers, to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, until we all attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ,<sup>112</sup>

Rather, speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, from whom the whole body, joined and held together by every joint with which it is equipped, when each part is working properly, makes the body grow so that it builds itself up in love.<sup>113</sup>

Maturity is experienced only in relationship. Dan Jenkins calls church the “school of maturity.”<sup>114</sup> It becomes very difficult when we talk about nurture and we expect the pastor and the elders to be the only nurturers. We need to build a culture where people are nurtured and loved into the faith. 1 Corinthians 12 and Ephesians 4 gifts are given to those who follow Christ

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<sup>111</sup> James Riley Estep and Jonathan H. Kim, eds., *Christian Formation: Integrating Theology & Human Development* (Nashville, TN: B & H Academic, 2010), 162.

<sup>112</sup> Ephesians 4:11-13 (English Standard Version).

<sup>113</sup> Ephesians 4:15-16 (English Standard Version).

<sup>114</sup> Jenkins, *Christian Maturity & Christian Success*, 15.

to achieve mutual maturity.<sup>115</sup> Because maturity is discovered only discovered only in relationship we have mutual interest in each other's growth toward maturity.<sup>116</sup>

This church, this house, this temple of God, is to be built up, and "every one of us" has received some gift to fit him for a helper in the building up. "Those who by action, instruction, exhortation, comfort, promote the Christian wisdom of others, and help them to live a correspondent life, are regarded as taking part in the erection of that building [that is, the church, or temple of God, in which the Holy Spirit dwells] and hence are said to edify, *to promote growth in Christian wisdom, affection, grace, virtue, holiness, blessedness.*"<sup>117</sup>

In the congregation new believers were helped into a deeper walk with God. The local congregation was the critical context in which faith was nurtured and converts matured.

The New Testament writers evince an understanding of growth in the Body of Christ.

The nurture process encouraged retention of Christ-followers to attend all services and prepare for the return of the Lord.

The writer of Hebrews states:

And let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near.<sup>118</sup>

The Epistle to the Galatians invites us to:

Carry each other's burdens, and in this way, you will fulfill the law of Christ.<sup>119</sup>

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<sup>115</sup> Duran, "Spiritual Nurture in the Local Seventh-day Adventist," 1-4.

<sup>116</sup> Jenkins, *Christian Maturity & Christian Success*, 5.

<sup>117</sup> C. O. Boothe, *Plain Theology for Plain People* (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2017), 81.

<sup>118</sup> Hebrews 10:24-25 (English Standard Version).

<sup>119</sup> Galatians 6:2 (English Standard Version).

## CHAPTER SUMMARY

In summary, the culture of the New Testament was one that presumed the importance of spiritual growth. The world in which Christianity was born valued both historically and theologically the purposeful maturity of newcomers to the faith. This well-defined and consistent process in the New Testament shows the work of nurture and discipleship in households, and in communities of faith founded by apostles, or led by spiritual leaders. However, nurture is also understood as the work of all the members of the community.

Furthermore, the Christian Scripture preserves for us ways of engaging spiritual growth that does not neglect both personal and communal efforts toward maturation and retention. While God is the supreme nurturer and model of growth and maturity, humans play a vital role in the process. The model in the New Testament shows that home, teachers such as the rabbi, disciples, apostles, clergy and laity were at various times and in numerous ways overlapping participants in nurture.

## CHAPTER 4

### SPIRITUAL PRACTICES FOR NURTURE AND RETENTION

As shown in Chapter 1, the purpose of nurture is embedded in the concept of discipleship and the mission of the church. An emphasis on nurture, therefore, is in many ways a return to the earliest values of Christianity. Today, those values may need to be rediscovered in our churches. James Fowler says nurture “consists of all the ways a community of faith, under pastoral leadership, intentionally sponsors the awakening, shaping, rectifying, healing, and ongoing growth in vocations of Christian persons and community, under the pressure and power of the in-breaking kingdom of God.”<sup>120</sup> This chapter will consider how this can be accomplished.

#### REDISCOVERING SPIRITUAL NURTURE AS MISSION: SEVENTH-DAY ADVENTIST PERSPECTIVES ON SPIRITUAL CARE, NURTURE, AND RETENTION

In the course of my research, I began to understand how nurture is a return to the core principles of my denomination as it relates to its expressed mission. The Seventh-day Adventist Church has both historically prioritized spiritual nurture and is currently engaged in a mission for rediscovery in retention. In addition, spiritual growth has become a renewed emphasis in the understanding of the church.

If we believe spirituality is an ongoing process of growth, the church should be engaged in some way to ensure that opportunity exists for newly baptized and newly joining church members experience such growth. Whereas growth is a process, the formation of methodology for integrating new members into nurturing communities is consistent with this teaching. Despite

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<sup>120</sup> James W. Fowler, *Faith Development and Pastoral Care* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1989), Kindle loc. 137.

the integral role that nurture must play in the context of SDA church ministry, the church has not always excelled or offered resources to accomplish this task.

### **Mission of Local Church Boards**

Every local Seventh-day Adventist Church is governed by a church board, led by the pastor, and charged by the congregation to handle the business of the local church. Though each board member is either a departmental leader or local elder, and responsible for and or handles oversight of a department they are elected or appointed to serve, those are not the entirety of what a board member ought to be concerned.

One of the primary functions of the local church board is “spiritual nurturing and mentoring new members.”<sup>121</sup> Board member responsibilities and functions are outlined in the SDA Church Manual which includes this task. Thus, the church interprets the role of the board as being responsible to the nurture needs of the congregation.

The Church Manual is revised every 5 years and spiritual nurture has been included in every edition since 1981. In the most recent edition of the church manual, spiritual nurture is third only to “creating an active discipleship plan” and “evangelism in all its phases.”<sup>122</sup> According to the manual, “Its [the church board’s] chief concern is having an active discipleship plan in place, which includes both the spiritual nurture of the church and the work of planning and fostering evangelism.”<sup>123</sup>

### **Mission of Local Members**

In addition to the church board all members of the church have a responsibility for spiritual nurture as well. Many churches are rediscovering the biblical mandate for a spiritual

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<sup>121</sup> See Appendix I

<sup>122</sup> See Appendix I

<sup>123</sup> See Appendix I



ministry of each church member. In recent years, the Seventh-day Adventist World Church launched the *Total Member Involvement Initiative*. The purpose of this initiative to involve “every member, every church, every administrative entity, every type of public outreach ministry, personal and institutional outreach.”<sup>124</sup> The nurture challenge is, therefore, a matter for all leaders and members to address.

Seventh-day Adventists have long placed a value on nurture and on member participation in nurturing service. Ellen G. White, a revered voice in Adventism, wrote on the topic of spiritual nurture and need for those who are mature in the faith to help those who are new. She wrote:

Those who have newly come to the faith should be patiently and tenderly dealt with, and it is the duty of the older members of the church to devise ways and means to provide help and sympathy and instruction for those who have conscientiously withdrawn from other churches. . . The church has a special responsibility laid upon her to attend to these souls who have followed the first rays of light they have received; and if the members of the church neglect this duty, they will be unfaithful to the trust that God has given them.<sup>125</sup>

Counsel from White is not limited to church leaders. Rather, the leaders and members broadly have a responsibility to God to be engaged in the matter of new member maturation.

### **Mission and Fundamental Belief**

Spiritual growth has become a renewed emphasis in the denomination. In the 2005 General Conference Session, the Church adopted the belief statement “Growing in Christ,” making it number eleven of 28 fundamental teachings of the Church.<sup>126</sup> The added belief came

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<sup>124</sup> Seventh-day Adventist Church, “*What Is Total Member Involvement?*” accessed November 08, 2018, <https://tmi.adventist.org/about>.

<sup>125</sup> Ellen G. White, *Evangelism* (Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald, 2002), 351.

<sup>126</sup> The Seventh-day Adventist Church, “World Church: Growing in Christ, New Belief Statement, Voted,” *Adventist News Network* (July 2005), <https://news.adventist.org/en/all-news/news/go/2005-07-03/world-church-growing-in-christ-new-belief-statement-voted/>.

out of the sense that it was vital to stress the importance of spirituality as a maturing factor in the life of the believer.

### **A Journey Towards Spiritual Practices**

In his book, *Joining God, Remaking Church, Changing the world*, Alan Roxburgh addresses bridging the gap between having a stated church mission and purposefully achieving that mission.<sup>127</sup> Roxburgh provides the essential language for perhaps realigning mission with nurture, retention, integration and commitment objectives in a congregation's ministry to the public. He challenges us to live out our stated mission. The title of his book sums up his congregations' statement of purpose to join God, remake the church, and change the world. For his congregation to accomplish this purpose, Roxburgh suggests that Christian spirituality becomes embodied in the lives of believers through intentional spiritual practices.<sup>128</sup>

He invites congregations to change its habits and begin a journey in five spiritual practices which are, 1) listening, 2) discerning, 3) testing, 4) reflection, and 5) deciding. Listening was to hear from God and the community.<sup>129</sup> Discerning was important to distinguish the best option at the time.<sup>130</sup> Testing is needed to make a small commitment to determine whether going further is sound decision.<sup>131</sup> Reflection is interpreting the previous steps.<sup>132</sup> Deciding is taking action after the previous steps have been done.<sup>133</sup>

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<sup>127</sup> Alan J. Roxburgh, *Joining God, Remaking Church, Changing the World: The New Shape of the Church in Our Time* (New York: Morehouse Publishing, 2015), v.

<sup>128</sup> Roxburgh, *Joining God, Remaking Church, Changing the World*, Kindle loc. 1183.

<sup>129</sup> Roxburgh, *Joining God, Remaking Church, Changing the World*, 56-57.

<sup>130</sup> Roxburgh, *Joining God, Remaking Church, Changing the World*, 79.

<sup>131</sup> Roxburgh, *Joining God, Remaking Church, Changing the World*, 81.

<sup>132</sup> Roxburgh, *Joining God, Remaking Church, Changing the World*, 91.

<sup>133</sup> Roxburgh, *Joining God, Remaking Church, Changing the World*, 94

Roxburgh's book explains how congregational habits can either reveal a loss of mission or display clarity of mission. He makes a keen observation by noting the benefits of spiritual practices to the vitality and relevance of our faith. He rather insightfully terms these habits as spiritual practices. They are not merely plans, objectives, and goals; they are habits.<sup>134</sup>

The same should be true in the case of new members in the church. With an understanding of spiritual practices, new members can adequately and practically engage in the new-found faith they profess in the fellowship of a Christian community. Based on the practices of the church, new Christians may properly be integrated, nurtured, and retained into the church.

### UNDERSTANDING THE NEW MEMBER EXPERIENCE

The need for new member nurture is as prevalent today as it was at any time in the forming of the Christian church. As one author asserts "there is no moratorium on the human need for spiritual and moral nurture."<sup>135</sup> It is necessary to formulate ways to nurture. We must also be aware of the issues that newcomers face. Jane Thayer urges us to "consider the challenges faced by these new members as they walk into a subculture whose worldview often conflicts with society."<sup>136</sup>

#### **New Member Experience in Stages**

Balvin Braham, a pastor and author of the book, *A Practical Guide to Evangelism How to Win and Keep New Members*, says that all new members go through predictable and recognizable stages

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<sup>134</sup> Roxburgh, *Joining God, Remaking Church, Changing the World*, 56, 107, 91.

<sup>135</sup> C. Eric Lincoln and Lawrence H. Mamiya, *The Black Church in the African American Experience*, (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003), Kindle loc. 6987.

<sup>136</sup> Jane Thayer, "Pastors' Perspectives on Assimilating New Members Part 2 - Discipling Strategies," *Ministry: International Journal for Pastors*, April 2010, <https://www.ministrymagazine.org/archive/2010/04/assimilating-new-members-part-2.html>.

when they join a church, whether they are aware or not.<sup>137</sup> He says, that if the church can observe those five phases carefully, it will give us insight on how best to meet the nurturing needs of new members. Balvin's five phases of a new member experience are: 1) Passion Stage, 2) Disillusionment, Stage 3) Acceptance stage, 4) Integration Stage, and 5) Commitment Stage.<sup>138</sup> Baldwin's stages are explained as follows:

**1. Passion Stage.** New members are initially very passionate as they enter the new faith. Characterized as the "first love" phase, here new members are excited about what they are learning and hearing about God. They cannot get enough of their newfound religious awakening.<sup>139</sup>

**2. Disillusionment Stage.** Following the initial excitement and passion associated with their newly forged faith, new members become disillusioned. At that point, they are most likely to question why they made the decision to join the church in the first place. The disillusionment begins as they understand the realities of the church community: (i) people are flawed and will rub them the wrong way (ii) those most helpful in leading them to the passion stage have disappointed them; (iii) outside factors and influences are discouraging their church involvement.<sup>140</sup> All these factors lead these individuals to discouragement, depression, and eventually to drop out.

**3. Acceptance Stage.** In this stage, new members successfully move pass disillusionment.<sup>141</sup> Instead of resenting others, they recognize that others in the church have challenges and weaknesses

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<sup>137</sup> Balvin Braham, "Nurturing New Members," interview by Derek Morris, *Ministry in Motion TV*, October 22, 2018, video, 24:30,

<https://www.ministryinmotion.tv/episode/nurturing-new-members-balvin-braham/>.

<sup>138</sup> Balvin Braham, *A Practical Guide to Evangelism How to Win and Keep New Members*, (Doral, FL: Inter-American Division Publishing Association, 2014), 193-194.

<sup>139</sup> Revelation 2:4 (King James Version).

<sup>140</sup> Braham, interview.

<sup>141</sup> Braham, *A Practical Guide to Evangelism*, 196.

too. They accept their own imperfection as well as those of their church family and have a sense of belonging and feeling of membership.

**4. Integration Stage.** Participation and active involvement in the life of the church is achieved at this stage. New members are involved in ministries, activities, or services with respect to the purpose of the church. They are involved with the lives of other church members. Integration is not always reached even with those who have been members for longer than a year.<sup>142</sup> A 2002 Gallup poll determined that of all congregation members in the United States, 26% are engaged, 56% are not engaged, and the remaining 18% are actively disengaged from their congregations.<sup>143</sup> This means, 74% of members were not engaged in their congregations. However, it is the integration stage that keeps people involved, active, and functioning in the church.<sup>144</sup>

**5. Commitment Stage.** The last and deepest stage of a new member's conversion experience, the new member becomes "a pillar in the church."<sup>145</sup> They stake their claim on their faith and religious community. They live with the confidence, "I belong, here."<sup>146</sup> "This is my family."<sup>147</sup> They even ask questions like, "Why wasn't I here a long time ago?"<sup>148</sup> Balvin says support is needed to new believers who are through these phases.

The phases of a new convert are critical. Dr. Godfred Ansah also explains the nature of "post-decisional regret."<sup>149</sup> Ansah echoes the sentiment that the church environment poses

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<sup>142</sup> Braham, interview.

<sup>143</sup> Albert L. Winseman, "Breakthrough Research on Congregational Engagement," February 2002, <https://news.gallup.com/poll/5281/breakthrough-research-congregational-engagement.aspx>.

<sup>144</sup> Braham, *A Practical Guide to Evangelism*, 196.

<sup>145</sup> Braham, interview.

<sup>146</sup> Braham, interview.

<sup>147</sup> Braham, interview.

<sup>148</sup> Braham, interview.

<sup>149</sup> Godfred T. Ansah, *Membership Retention of New Believers: Help Them Stay* (Hartford, CT: A&A Associates, 2015), 54.

challenges to a person newly initiated into the community of faith. Challenges which if not addressed will be counterproductive to the initial decision to join. External and internal reasons may account for dissatisfaction, but concerted efforts of support from the church members can motivate newcomers beyond this sense of regret.<sup>150</sup>

An effective process by the local church looks like a method in which a person who receives spiritual nurture is more grounded in their decision making, able to confidently deal with successes and failures, unwaveringly able to engage in a successful devotional life despite situational challenges that they face; able to stay spiritually ground when facing opposition and conflict in normal environments where they would act out of character.

### **Key Strategies for Nurture, Retention, Integration and Commitment**

*“Newcomers don’t come with Velcro already applied. It’s up to the congregation to make them stick.” – Calvin Ratz<sup>151</sup>*

Research into new member retention points to specific habits of congregations that retain and mature new members. These habits contribute to full integration and commitment into the life of the church. I have been able to narrow these strategies to three significant reasons behind retention (four if you break one of the strategies in two major categories).<sup>152</sup> The strategies are as follows: 1) small groups (including church orientation groups, learning, and fellowship groups), 2) friendship strategies, and 3) service strategies.

Balvin Braham lists seven characteristics of a nurture plan that could contribute to retention of newly baptized members. These included (1) a fellowship reception for newly baptized, new

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<sup>150</sup> Ansah, *Membership Retention*, 54-55.

<sup>151</sup> Gary L. MacIntosh, *Beyond the First Visit the Complete Guide to Connecting Guests to Your Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2006), Kindle loc. 1769.

<sup>152</sup> Gil Stieglitz, *Keeping Visitors: A Systematic Approach to Assimilate Visitors into Your Church* (Roseville, CA: Vibrant, 2016).

members Sabbath school class, (3) pairing new members with a spiritual-support guide, (4) small groups or witnessing teams (5) participation in aspects of church service (6) participation in the church ministries (7) encouragement of members to study doctrinal studies covering doctrine and church membership.<sup>153</sup>

Strategies send a clear message that the newcomers are important to God and to the church. In other words, the entire church must take up a role in nurture that will convey the care and concern of the congregation for integration and commitment. Though no church will attract everyone, churches can strive to be inclusive in ways that will see to it newcomers are “encouraged, incorporated, and included.”<sup>154</sup>

### I. Small Group Strategy

Churches that excel at retention, integration and commitment utilize the strategy of creating and maintaining small groups. A small group strategy has shown to make a difference in how newcomers are able to assimilate into the congregation. This strategy helps new members to be more connected to the congregation in and through consistent interaction with other members of the church.

A small group is a subset of the congregation that is organized around a common purpose and function. They are the church within the church, or nucleus in the anatomy of growing churches. Loren Mead, a church growth scholar, wrote about the importance of groups in his book, *More than Numbers: the way churches grow*. At the time of his publication, Mead reported half of the new members to join a congregation had left congregations within two years of

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<sup>153</sup> Balvin, *A Practical Guide to Evangelism*, 200-202.

<sup>154</sup> Andrew D. Weeks, *Welcome!: Tools and Techniques for New Member Ministry* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 1992), 16.

joining. Mead attributed this trend in large part to a lack of socialization, which he defined as “the process by which a stranger is brought into a group.”<sup>155</sup> On the other hand, new members stay where this is done well. Essentially, small groups help to keep people from disappearing in a congregation, and help them become familiarized with the expectations, beliefs, and practices of the church

*a. Types of Small Groups*

Church small groups for newcomers fall into two categories: learning groups and fellowship groups. First, learning groups help newcomers understand the meaning of membership. Also known as orientation groups, these groups are guided by pastors, elders, or other church leaders. One leader or team of leaders will work with a group of newly joining to share key information about the church and how it works.

Learning groups communicate very specific information for the newcomer to fully mature in various areas of the Christian life. An example of this is the *Viewpoints* model of Christian nurture for adults which considers the ways in which new believers must think critically and engage the world from a Christian standpoint.<sup>156</sup> The model includes learning activities for forming faith perspectives around believing, the Church community, vocation, justice, and worship for discussion in learning groups.<sup>157</sup>

Additionally, fellowship groups establish on-going support through relationship building. Lyle E. Schaller indicates that even if fellowship groups are based on various areas, they have the potential to move newcomers into deeper relationship in the church. He claims that “it is

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<sup>155</sup> Loren B. Mead, *More than Numbers: The Ways Churches Grow* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 1993), 78.

<sup>156</sup> H. Edward Everding et al., *Viewpoints: Perspectives of Faith and Christian Nurture* (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 1998), 147.

<sup>157</sup> Everding, *Viewpoints: Perspectives of Faith and Christian Nurture*, 95-153.



difficult to overstate the role of these face to face groups in reaching, attracting and assimilating new members.”<sup>158</sup>

### *b. Components of a Small Group*

Though small groups are either learning groups or fellowship groups, they should contain the same basic elements. Small groups set the tone for acceptance and learning critical to churches being able to inspire growth in new Christians. George G. Hunter III sums up the basic components of small groups as: love, learning, decisions, and doing. He explains the importance of these characteristics stating,

*Love:* group members caring for one another, sharing in each other’s lives through accountability, prayer, and intentional acts of service one to another.

*Learn:* Group members experiencing a growing knowledge of God and themselves.

*Decide:* Group members making decisions about curriculum, activities, and schedule.

*Do:* Group members participating in an activity or serving in a task together.<sup>159</sup>

These characteristics attract and keep newly joining persons and create an environment that new members seek. Small groups encourage the development of healthy relationships among members, which creates love, synergy and a strong community of believers. They also help members connect to God in the most practical ways.

## II. Friendship Strategy

The friendship strategy is a key component for new believer nurture. Newcomers must find friends within the congregation with whom they can make and maintain rich friendships.

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<sup>158</sup> Lyle E. Schaller, *Growing Plans: Strategies to Increase Your Church's Membership* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1983), 96.

<sup>159</sup> George G. Hunter, III, *Church for the Unchurched* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1996), 94.

Friendships are intentional, relational, experiential, and take time to acquire. Commitment is key to start and build lasting friendships. The spiritual friend is a nurturer to the new Christian.

According to the writer of Hebrews, we must “keep on loving each other as brothers and sisters. Don’t forget to show hospitality to strangers, for some who have done this have entertained angels without realizing it!”<sup>160</sup> There is a mandate for hospitality in Scripture. People visit churches hoping they will find places that are friendly and hospitable. It goes on to say, “distributing to the necessity of saints, given to hospitality.”<sup>161</sup>

While hospitality is critical for people to return as regular guests, they need something deeper to sustain and nourish their spirituality. Ed Stetzer explains it this way, “Friendliness is not enough—People are not looking for a friendly church, they are looking for friends.”<sup>162</sup> Being friendly, however, should stimulate friendships.

Church is a place where among other things attendees hope to socialize and build relationships. Friendliness is a key reason why people become second-time guests. People generally return to churches when the environment is warm, inviting and caring. Win Arn says that there are a number of important ratios for the healthy church with regard to church growth; one of those is the friendship ratio, which he says should be 1:7:

Each new convert or new member should be able to identify at least seven friends in the church within the first six months. Friendships appear to be the strongest bond cementing new converts or members to their congregation. If new converts do not immediately develop meaningful friendships in their church, expect them to return to their old friendships-and ways-outside the church. Seven new friendships are a minimum; ten, fifteen, or more would be better. There is an important time factor to this

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<sup>160</sup> Hebrews 13:1-2 (New Living Translation).

<sup>161</sup> Romans 12:13 (King James Version).

<sup>162</sup> Ed Stetzer and Mike Dodson, *Comeback Churches: How 300 Churches Turned Around and Yours Can Too* (Nashville, TN: B&H Publishing Group, 2007), 109.

ratio, as well. The first six months are crucial. New converts or members not integrated into the body within that six-month time period are well on their way out the back door.<sup>163</sup>

Essentially what Oswald and Leas say above underscores the necessity of friendship for the following reasons:

- The number of close friends a new member develops in the church has a *direct influence* on whether he or she continues as an active member.
- If after 6 months the new member can identify *few or no close friends* in the church, the chances are high that the person will soon be *inactive*.
- Each new convert or new member should be able to identify at least *seven* friends in the church

The more friends a newcomer can identify in church the better chances they will remain.

Thus, the friendship strategy is activating church members to purposefully take interest in newcomers by becoming friends with them.

### III. Service and Involvement Strategy

Involvement in service encourages people to stay in the church. Gary MacIntosh in the book *Beyond the First Visit* says, “Opportunities for involvement must continue to be presented, but never forced.”<sup>164</sup> The church should create opportunities for people to grow into spiritual maturity and that includes involvement in the mission of the church. As mentioned before, integration and commitment are stages that are associated with retaining members by involving

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<sup>163</sup> Roy M. Oswald and Speed B. Leas, *The Inviting Church: A Study of New Member Assimilation* (Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 1987), 58.

<sup>164</sup> MacIntosh, *Beyond the First Visit*, Kindle loc. 2360.

them in the life of the church. New member involvement should occur as soon as they join, and, in some cases sooner.<sup>165</sup>

Robert Logan says, assimilation takes place naturally when new people are “able to develop friends in your church, join a group or class and become involved in serving others. As you encourage them to find their own place of service in your group, they will be assimilated into the life of your church.”<sup>166</sup> Logan explains here that service is a key component along with friendship and small groups in integrating new members into the overall life of the church.

Service is an integral part of the new member experience for bringing about integration and commitment. When newcomers serve they essentially join in the mission of the church and become partners in carrying out its purposes. Service can involve work in the church, and in the community for the church. Either way ample opportunities for service in the congregation makes room for newcomers.<sup>167</sup> The more opportunities to participate in service and involvement indicate to the newcomers “how to truly open the church [is] to them [as] children of God, with their unique gifts, skills and other abilities.”<sup>168</sup> Thus, these opportunities contribute to spiritual growth.<sup>169</sup>

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<sup>165</sup> Russell Burrill, *How to Grow an Adventist Church: Fulfilling the Mission of Jesus* (Hart Books: Fallbrook, CA, 2009), 104.

<sup>166</sup> Robert E. Logan and Larry Short, *Mobilizing for Compassion: Moving People into Ministry* (Grand Rapids, MI: F. Revell, 1994), Kindle loc. 1383.

<sup>167</sup> Weeks, *Welcome!: Tools and Techniques*, 17.

<sup>168</sup> Weeks, *Welcome!: Tools and Techniques*, 16

<sup>169</sup> Nelson Searcy and Jennifer Dykes Henson, *Fusion: Turning First-time Guests into Fully Engaged Members of Your Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2017), 17.

## **CHAPTER 5**

### **AN EXPLORATION OF SPIRITUAL NURTURE PRACTICES AT THE WILLIS AVENUE SEVENTH-DAY ADVENTIST CHURCH**

#### **OVERVIEW**

This project began with library research in the area of church growth and Christian discipleship. I introduced my project through several strategic meetings. First, I sat with my board of elders. Our church elders oversee departments and church ministries. They are in direct contact with the about three or four ministries over which they are assigned. In that meeting, I expressed my desire for the church to discuss spiritual nurture. Next, I prepared a project announcement that was presented to the board and voted on relative to the church's participation in the project.<sup>170</sup> Finally, I launched the idea to the congregation through church bulletin and pastoral announcements.

#### **DESIGN**

The project had two major parts. One part of the project was a two-sermon series preached in the sanctuary during the weekly worship service. The second part of the project was a series of workshops. Workshops were held on the fourth floor in the fellowship hall of the church. The criteria for workshop participants was that they had to be baptized church members who were 18 years or older. It was my intention to preach two sermons and two workshops. In order to allow time for the congregation to absorb more of the material and respond to the questionnaire, I actually did two sermons and three workshops.

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<sup>170</sup> See Appendix A

## **Sermons**

I offered two sermons on the topic of spiritual nurture. Sermon one dealt with the Parable of the Prodigal Son. I spoke about creating a church culture that encourages retention and assimilation.<sup>171</sup>

Sermon two dealt with Ephesians 4. I spoke about spiritual growth as process of mutual benefit and mutual maturity through spiritual gifts. I emphasized that togetherness was the essence of spiritual nurture resulting in spiritual maturity into the likeness of Jesus Christ.<sup>172</sup>

## **Workshops**

The workshops held included the bulk of the information about the topic. I offered three workshops on the topic of spiritual nurture.

Workshop 1 dealt with (i) the theological understandings and biblical background of spiritual nurture, and (ii) the problem of member retention and assimilation in the church.<sup>173</sup>

Workshop 2 dealt with how spiritual nurture might be better prioritized practically in the functions of the church. Consideration was given to spiritual practices as church habits, and how those habits aid in the shaping of new members.<sup>174</sup>

Workshop 3 covered specific congregational practices that aid in retention and assimilation through spiritual nurture of new believers. Participants were shown strategies for the church to participate more deliberately in the effort of retention.<sup>175</sup>

Survey feedback for the project was collected at the close of every workshop session. Survey questions were primarily drawn from the content in the workshop materials. All

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<sup>171</sup> See Appendix B

<sup>172</sup> See Appendix E

<sup>173</sup> See Appendix C

<sup>174</sup> Appendix F

<sup>175</sup> Appendix J

questionnaires were distributed immediately following every presentation and were collected before participants left.<sup>176</sup>

## DATA ANALYSIS & DISCUSSION

### Workshop 1 Data Analysis and Discussion

In the first workshop, participants were asked two questions based on the presentation. They were asked to share how they interpret and express nurture in the congregation and mention some helpful insights from the workshop.

Key to the way respondents saw nurture taking place was through knowledge of the Bible, prayerful attitude, and strong interpersonal communication which were all cited as important and crucial elements for the nurture they describe giving. Respondents emphasized characteristics such as care, concern, love, acceptance, listening, and supportiveness as key to influencing how they interact and how those interactions might be perceived by new members.

**Question 1:** Describe how you nurture others in this congregation through your interactions?

Responses were not particularly varied to this question. Below is a summary of some of the responses.

- Using Bible study to connect over similar topics of interest
- Using Bible study as a tool of encouragement
- Educating newcomers on health principles
- Listening to others as they relate challenges
- Joining in prayer over concerns
- Modeling Christianity
- Communicating with newcomers in-person and over the phone

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<sup>176</sup> See Appendices D, H, and K

- Publicly, church programs
- Privately, One-on-one interactions

**Question 2:** What insights did you gain today that would be helpful for your spiritual nurture, or, for the nurture of the congregation?

Reponses were particularly varied to this question. Some of the insights gained included:

- a new and clear recognition of spiritual nurture demonstrated in the scripture;
- a greater understanding of spiritual growth overall;
- the way spiritual nurture is modeled in the Bible by God and Jesus and figures in the Old and New Testament helped to connect nurture with the present mission of the congregation
- a greater realization of attention needed in the area of spiritual nurture in the congregation and denomination
- a sense that a stronger emphasis needed to be placed on discipleship
- a new understanding of the role of nurture in discipleship process
- more nurturers are needed in the church

Respondents generally felt more could be done to help new members, and the newly joining to be discipled. Insights from the workshop helped to stimulate interest on ways to more consistently nurture newcomers. The workshop also helped participants to consider the potential of a renewed focus on nurture activities.

## **Workshop 2 Data analysis and Discussion**

The second workshop dealt with spiritual practices for nurture and retention. In the second workshop, participants were again asked to respond to the presentation. Overall,



congregants said that because of the presentation, they were able to see how the church as a whole can be more involved in spiritual nurture.

**Question 1:** What insights have you gained about how the church can be involved in spiritual nurture?

Some insights gained included:

- the church can encourage new members:
- fellowship is important
- church must be more relational
- show care and concern
- mentor them
- more aware that the church be more relationship oriented and
- do more to foster unity and togetherness
- go beyond the one-day weekly services
- go beyond being cordial and surface connections
- Value to the church of listening
- Listen to needs before planning and project formation
- the church can be more involved in the stages of the new member experience.

**Question Two:** What did you learn about spiritual practices that will contribute to our work as a congregation to nurture new members?

Below is a summary of some of the responses from participants:

- mature members should continue to grow and become spiritually engaged in order to nurture new members spiritually

- the church needs consistency between belief and practice to ensure consistency in habits of spiritual practices
- Consistency in church practice creates habits, and spiritual practices require regular routine

**Question Three:** What excites you about the opportunity to put this form of nurture into practice?

Among the responses are some of the following. The participants were excited:

- to be used by God to help others
- to know that whereas the devil was working to discourage individuals, God's purpose was that none should be castaway
- to have an opportunity to show compassion and to build relationships
- to have reinforcement of discipleship principles that they were already passionate about
- that it coincided with an online discipleship program that one participant was taking
- that spiritual nurture was aligned to missions, bible study courses, and evangelism
- that it presented an opportunity to be authentic and sincere.

### **Workshop 3 Data Analysis and Discussion**

In the third workshop, participants were asked two questions based on the presentations and the sermons. First, they were asked based on the sermon series and workshops, what inspired them most. Overall, people were inspired by the solutions some churches have adopted to keep members in the church.

**Question 1:** What inspired you most from the sermon series and workshops?

Among the responses are some of the following. They were inspired:

- to be involved forming friendships with new members
- to be nurturing and retaining possibilities
- reaching out
- to be advocates and sponsors for new believers and be more personally involved
- to take an active role as an “individual believer”
- to nurture new members through friendships
- by service and mentorship possibilities
- Small groups for new members to group in was also inspiring.

**Question 2:** How have the content, ideas, or insights have been helpful?

Below is a summary of some of the responses from participants.

- ideas offered new tools for retention
- challenged because they felt that the ideas might be difficult to implement in a church that was perhaps so used to operating differently
- them see the importance of having a step-by-step approach to working with new believers.
- helped them to reconsider their own nurture when they were new believers
- felt a responsibility to share and mentor new members
- ideas might apply to formerly attending members who dropped from attendance
- saw overlapping issues and solutions

## **CHAPTER 6**

### **EVALUATIONS, CONCLUSIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

The purpose of this research project was to explore ways to address new member dropout through nurture and retention strategies at the Willis Avenue Church. My purpose was to both educate and build discussion around this topic. The resources, knowledge, and information gained in preparation for the project, the project itself, and the responses and reactions of my congregation, have been critical for assessing difficulties, drawing conclusions, and examining solutions for dropouts of newly joining members of the church.

#### **INTERPRETATION OF FINDINGS**

Data collected from this project reflects the thoughts, responses and reflections on the topic of nurture and retention at the Willis Avenue Church. The data, I believe narrates the experience of new member engagement and retention based on congregational life. Those responses indicate both the challenges and the hopes of the congregation to conserve membership gains.

In this project, I was able to discover that members at the Willis Avenue Seventh-day Adventist Church recognize the retention challenges facing the congregation. They are aware of the difficulty to retain members that are newcomers. The congregation also perceives the congregation on a whole as needing a more nurturing environment.

This project also shows that most members are lacking the resources to do nurture. The fact there is not a planned process to move new members towards integration and commitment made incorporating new Christians a challenge for the church. The project revealed that greater focus and connections needed to be designed regarding discipleship, evangelism, and ministry involvement. It is possible that members stayed in the

congregation because of an informal nurturing from a mature member but this was not taught as a process and no formal strategy was put into place.

Though one might argue that the church has programs and ministries that presently cater to spiritual growth such as sabbath school classes, sermons, children's programs, and new believer bible studies; it would be wrong to assume that all these ministries by definition are nourishing environments especially to newcomers. My findings also suggest that is a strong connection between friendship and incorporating new members in the life of the church. People are more likely to remain in church when it's a loving, friendly, and supportive environment.

### RECOMMENDATIONS FOR ACTION

Actions need to be taken to move the church leadership and members toward creating an active assimilation plan for the church. Special attention should be given to how disciples are made and sustained in the congregation. A variety of strategies and ministries and people cooperating together are necessary. Pastoral leadership is critical to fostering the focus towards coordinated efforts of integration and involvement.

More tools and training are needed to aid in hospitality and friendship. There is a need for the nurture of individuals and ministries to be sustained by the church. There were efforts taking place to nurture but it seems to be more impactful when the church supports, encourages and initiates that nurture.

Perhaps more opportunities are needed whereby new members can be exposed to ministry roles and responsibilities. Spiritual mentors and companions need to be assigned along with members that can support the spiritual guardian. Opportunities for building relationships should be created so that people can develop bonds throughout the year. Greater emphasis should

be placed on relationships, friendship, and support among members of the congregation through sermons, workshops, and leadership training.

I recommend that the church commit to beginning a new believers' class urgently. The virtues of the small group have already been highlighted in this project. A new believer's class will communicate that newcomers are welcomed and supported at the church. Initiating such a program will also give opportunities for the pastoral staff, leaders, and board members to be involved in that formal process of spiritual nurture.

### RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FURTHER STUDY

Research in retention brought up several issues that I would like to explore further. I would like to explore how nurture strategies can be used in reclamation ministries.

In my research, I found that the greatest group leaving the church was young adults. I would like to explore ways that I can fit these approaches in a specific context to help youth and young adult church leaders respond to youth retention. Congregations need best practices for evangelizing, integrating and retaining youth and young adults.

Churches are losing every age group, but youth and young adults have a uniquely high potential of helping grow and assist the church as it moves forward. Youth and young adults also represent a perspective that the church must do what it can to celebrate and maintain. I would like to know how and what is needed and helpful for retaining young adults.

My interests have centered on the current church population and consequently my audience was mature members and leaders. I would like to research more from the perspective of newcomers and formulate a curriculum directed at newcomers for deepening their spiritual lives. Thousands of believers leave the church each year. Those dropouts go beyond new Christians. I have observed young people in church graduate out of church involvement. They then leave high

school or college and drop out of church because they didn't find it to be a place where their interests were supported or recognized. They found a place where people worshipped on weekends but there was a disconnect with Christ in everyday life.

## CONCLUSION

The current dropout experience of new Christians should concern local congregations. The church overall, and local congregations experience the loss and decline of members at an alarming rate. Thus, membership gains that we focus our attention on are being impacted negatively by losses. Once more, people are leaving churches possibly feeling unsupported and underdeveloped as they transition into a journey with God.

New approaches are needed to address spiritual nurture of new believers in a formal and organized fashion. To achieve the goal of creating a culture that fosters growth and encourages community requires that we create habits that meet that purpose. These new members require the warmth and love of churches intent on nurture ministry through small groups, friendships, and service.

## Appendix A



**Willis Avenue SDA  
Office of the Pastor**

495 Willis Ave  
Bronx, NY 10455  
Tel: (718) 842-4504

October 9, 2018

TO: Church Board Members

FROM: Richard Means, Jr., *Pastor*

DATE: October 9, 2018

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### PROJECT ANNOUNCEMENT

#### PROJECT INTRODUCTION

It is my pleasure to work with you, and serve the Willis Avenue Church, as your pastor. After much thought and prayer, I am excited to announce that our church will be undergoing a 4-part series entitled, *Restore*. This biblically based preaching and teaching series is designed to engage the church at large to explore the topic of nurturing new members for retention, integration and commitment.

#### PROJECT DETAILS

***Who:***

A. Attendees



- All church administrators, officers, leaders and members

#### B. Participants

- I am seeking a pool of about 15 non-paid volunteers, who will be asked to meet the following requirements:
  - a. Be at least 18 years of age
  - b. Be a baptized member of the Willis Ave church in *good and well standing* (1.e. member not under disciplinary action)
  - c. Attend project orientation, 2 sermons, 3 workshops and an exit interview
  - d. Engage in minor journaling exercise; 3-5 sentences daily

#### C. Project leadership team

- I am seeking 2 volunteers who will assist with planning, implementation and administrative duties

#### ***What:***

This 4-part series will include topics such as:

- Spiritual nurture
- Spiritual growth
- Spiritual gifts
- Discipleship
- Membership retention
- Strategic membership engagement
- Intentional relationship building
- Surveying past failures, evaluating current trends, and projecting successful retention

#### ***When:***

It is 4-part series which includes:

Sermon 1: Sabbath, October 13, 2018 at 11-1pm      Workshop 1: Wednesday October 17, 2018

Sermon 2: Sabbath, October 27 at 11-1pm      Workshop 2: Wednesday October 24, 2018

Where:

Sermons will take place in the worship service located in our main sanctuary on Saturday afternoons during our regular mid-day service. Workshops will take place during our mid-week service time slot, on the 4<sup>th</sup> floor, in our fellowship hall.

**Why:**

The Seventh-day Adventist Church is listed among the fastest growing Protestant churches worldwide.<sup>177</sup> Still, though it took 80 years of existence for Seventh-day Adventist membership to pass the half a million mark only, within the last 13 years membership increased from 13.5 million to over 20 million.<sup>178</sup> Rises in numerical growth, notwithstanding, the church worldwide is losing many of its newcomers.<sup>179</sup> While evangelism and church growth are essential to the mission of the Church, maintaining adequate retention has frequently challenged many local congregations.

The Willis Avenue Seventh-day Adventist church has recently undergone a successful evangelistic meeting in the summer of 2018. Success from this meeting has involved welcoming new individuals into church membership. As a follow-up to the success of this meeting, it is

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<sup>177</sup> MacDonald, “Adventists' Back-to-Basics.”

<sup>178</sup> D. J. B. Trim, “The Challenge of the 10/40 Window,” *2017 Annual Statistical Report: 153 Report of the General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists © for 2015 and 2016* (Silver Spring, MD: Pacific Press), 2017, 2,  
<http://documents.adventistarchives.org/Statistics/ASR/ASR2017.pdf>.

<sup>179</sup> Tracy, “Adventist Assess Why.”

essential for the entire church to be engaged in new member nurture to facilitate long-term success in retention.

***How:***

The effectiveness of this preaching and teaching series will be determined by the following measures:

*Short-term*

- Attendance to the series
- Personalized definitions for church nurture
- Meaningful conversations surrounding the topic
- Desire to discover and utilize gifts for church nurture

*Long-term*

- Keeping new members beyond the 8-month mark
- Mature members building intentional relationships with new members
- Nurture priority for discussion at various leadership meetings

Thank you in advance for your commitment to seeing this vision to fruition!

Blessings,

RM

Richard Means, Jr., MDiv., B.Th.

*Pastor*

Willis Avenue SDA Church

(718) 842-4504

“Unity in Community”

## Appendix B

### SERMON 1 OUTLINE

“Restore” Sermon Series (Sermon 1 of 2)

Preached, Saturday October 13, 2018

Title: The Comeback Effect

Topic: Creating a Culture for Retention, Integration, and Commitment

Text: Luke 15:1-2; 11-32

- I. Jesus breaks the rules by hanging around bad company (15:1)
- II. Jesus Parable of the Prodigal Son seems to back up the criticisms of the crowd (15:2)
  - a. The younger son places money over relationship (15:11-12)
  - b. The younger son places distance over closeness (15:13)
  - c. He is as bad as they say
- III. The son was wasteful, but the father was faithful (15:14, 17)
- IV. Parable for a church with a Comeback Effect
  - a. The parable teaches the church how it can be like the faithful father
  - b. In the book, *The Comeback Effect* by Jason Young and Jonathan Malm, the authors share how hospitality culture can make church a place where guests wish to come back.<sup>180</sup>
  - c. A Comeback Effect culture was present in the faithful father
    - i. He was non-judgmental. He does not ask for an apology or explanation.
    - ii. He was restorative. He gives the son what he forfeited.

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<sup>180</sup> Jason Young and Jonathan Malm, *The Come Back Effect: How Hospitality Can Compel Your Church's Guests to Return* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2018), 28-30.

iii. He was sacrificial. He celebrates and has lamb slain

- V. Gospel Experience: How can I demonstrate love that he (others) will think twice of leaving, again? Or, consider coming back? (15:18)
- VI. We are all sons and daughters restored (15:22-24)
  - a. We can participate in the turnaround
  - b. God invites us to be restorative
- VII. Appeal: Join God's invitation to restore and be restored

**Appendix C**  
**WORKSHOP 1 OUTLINE**

Wednesday, October 17, 2018

Topic: Theological Foundations of Nurture

Purpose: To show that a culture of spiritual care and nurture was present in the Bible and operated from fundamental commitment of support for development of faithfulness.

Time Length: 60 minutes

- I. Recognizing retention challenges
  - a. Illustration. Newcomer that is led to integration and commitment.
  - b. Data tell a story
- II. Reasons for study
  - a. The Seventh-day Adventist Church has lost 1 of every 3 members it has gained in the last 50 years.<sup>181</sup> Though the denomination grows, and the local churches grow, the drop-out rate is persistent. The need for nurturing contributes to the present situation with retention in Adventism.<sup>182</sup>
- III. Purpose
  - a. Exploration of spiritual nurture for retention, integration, motivation, and commitment of new members at the Willis Avenue Church
- IV. Basic Definition of Terms
  - a. Newcomer- anyone that has entered local congregational membership within the last 6-12 months.

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<sup>181</sup> Tracy, “Adventists Assess Why.”

<sup>182</sup> Duran, “Spiritual Nurture in the Local Seventh-day Adventist,” 11.

- b. Integration/ Assimilation- process of giving people the means and opportunity to transition from guests into members and then into active participants in the local church.<sup>183</sup>

## V. Theological Foundations of Spiritual Nurture

### a. Defining Spiritual Nurture

#### i. Theological Understanding

- 1. Spiritual nurture, theologically speaking, is the process through which God enters relationship/convent with a person or people-group and helps them grow in character and faithfulness.

- a. God nurtures individual's such as

- i. Adam and Eve, Moses, Joshua, Abraham, etc.

- b. God nurtures nations

- i. Israel is depicted as God's son in the Torah (Exodus to Deuteronomy)<sup>184</sup>

- ii. God is loving, compassion, protecting, providing

#### ii. Christological Perspective

- 1. Jesus ministry nurtures and reclaims those whose needs are not met elsewhere
- 2. Jesus nurtures his disciples

## VI. Biblical Foundations of Spiritual Nurture: Old Testament

### a. Household<sup>185</sup>

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<sup>183</sup> Searcy, *Fusion: Turning First-time Guests*, 76.

<sup>184</sup> Schmitt, "Israel as Son of God," 79.

<sup>185</sup> Genesis 18:19, Deuteronomy 6:4-6.

b. Priests<sup>186</sup>

c. Prophets<sup>187</sup>

- i. In the Old Testament church, the principal institutions of spiritual nurture were households through parents and the sanctuary through prophets and priests.

## VII. Biblical Foundations of Spiritual Nurture: New Testament

a. Household<sup>188</sup>

b. Rabbi: Teacher<sup>189</sup>

c. Apostle<sup>190</sup>

d. Clergy: local congregation leaders<sup>191</sup>

e. Laity: local participation in congregations<sup>192</sup>

- i. The Church was called to make disciples who reflect Jesus. This task is a ministry of nurture that fosters spiritual growth.<sup>193</sup>
- ii. NT uses community of the Church for mutual growth and nurture of gifts in the body of Christ.

## VIII. Conclusion

- a. A survey of spiritual nurture attests the important role nurture played. The worlds of the Old and New Testament valued both historically and theologically the

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<sup>186</sup> Malachi 2:7, 2 Chronicles 15:3, 17:7-9.

<sup>187</sup> Amos 3:7, 2 Kings 3:11.

<sup>188</sup> Ephesians 6:4.

<sup>189</sup> John 1:35, 8:31, 13:35, Matthew 28:19-20.

<sup>190</sup> 1 Peter 2:2, Jude 3.

<sup>191</sup> Ephesians 4:12, 1 Timothy 1:2.

<sup>192</sup> Ephesians 4:16.

<sup>193</sup> Duran, "Spiritual Nurture in the Local Seventh-day Adventist," 61.



purposeful maturity of newcomers to the faith leading to integration and commitment.

## **Appendix D**

### **WORKSHOP 1 QUESTIONNAIRE**

Theological Foundations of Nurture

Wednesday, October 17, 2018

**Question 1:** Describe how you nurture others in this congregation through your interactions?

**Question 2:** What insights did you gain today that would be helpful for your spiritual nurture, or, for the nurture of the congregation?

*Restore* | Preaching and Teaching Series

**This questionnaire is for non-paid volunteers who are participating in  
Pastor Richard Means, Jr.'s Doctor of Ministry Research**

## **Appendix E**

### **SERMON 2 OUTLINE**

“Restore” Sermon Series (Sermon 2 of 2)

Preached, Saturday October 27, 2018

Title: You’re Not Alone

Topic: Growth through mutual support of spiritual gifts.

Text: Ephesians 4:3-6, 11-16

- I. Recent bomb suspect surprisingly was not a part of a bigger plot but is described as a “loner”
- II. Being alone is dangerous for development
  - a. If left unchecked, we may become limited in our thinking
  - b. If left alone, we promote beliefs that suit our interpretation of facts
  - c. There is spiritual vulnerability when we are alone.
    - i. By ourselves, we are easy prey for the devil
- III. We were never meant to be alone
  - a. You are here today because you weren’t alone
  - b. God will never leave nor forsake you alone (Hebrews 13:5)
    - i. You were not alone in school, on the job, in the relationship; overcame abusive situation
    - ii. Despite the situation, you were not abandoned by God.
- IV. The church creates a community in which we are not alone (4:3-6)
  - a. Church of Ephesus shows us that we are not alone (4:3)
    - i. In their diverse community, there is unity (4:3-4)
    - ii. God brings us together (4:5-6)
  - b. Together, every gift is given (4:7, 11)

- i. Gifts are given to compliment not to compete (4:11)
    - ii. No one person has all gifts, but many gifts are present in one church (4:11)
    - iii. Gift are for the praise of our Maker and King
  - c. Together maturity is reached in the Lord (4:13)
    - i. Through spiritual gifts everyone benefits
    - ii. we are not left to grow alone, work alone, develop alone.
    - iii. together we look more like Christ (4:13,15)
      - 1. We take on Christ's attributes of love, respect, and concern for others  
(4:15)
      - 2. We take on Christ's mission of spiritual nurture (4:15)
        - a. fullness in Christ (4:13)
- V. We are better together (4:16)
  - a. Together we display the power of not being alone (4:16)
  - b. You should know where your help comes (4:16)

## **Appendix F**

### **WORKSHOP 2 OUTLINE**

Wednesday, October 24, 2018

Topic: Spiritual Practices for Nurture and Retention, Pt. 1

Purpose: To assert the primary role of the church as a nurturer, and to help participants draw connections between the mission and habits of the congregation.

Time Length: 60 minutes

#### **I. Introduction**

- a. One of the explicit roles of the church board is spiritual nurture
- b. Exercise: Sort out role of the church board as they appear in the church manual.
  - i. The Seventh-day Adventist Church has nine functions of the church board.  
  
The purpose of this exercise is for people to explore assumptions and see ways mission is or is not reinforced by practice.

#### **II. Rediscovering Seventh-day Adventist Nurture Mission**

- a. Mission of local church boards
  - i. The Church is fundamentally described as a nurturing entity that has been concerned about nurture for some time.
  - ii. Since 1981 “Spiritual Nurture” has been listed as the first responsibility of the Church Board.
- b. Mission of local members
  - i. Total Member Involvement initiative<sup>194</sup>

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<sup>194</sup> Seventh-day Adventist Church, *What Is Total Member Involvement?*

ii. Duty of older members of the church<sup>195</sup>

c. Mission and fundamental belief

i. Fundamental Belief #11, 2005, relates to essence of spiritual nurture, retention, integration, and commitment<sup>196</sup>

ii. Key Points of Belief 11 (Growing in Christ):

1. Work of the Holy Spirit

2. Freedom from our past deeds

3. Growing into Christ's likeness in character

4. Transforming power of Spirit

5. Mission of Nurture

III. A journey towards spiritual practices

a. In his book, Alan Roxburgh talks about bridging the gap between having a stated church mission and purposefully achieving that mission.<sup>197</sup>

b. Roxburgh submits an approach that would be helpful for congregations with an intent to realign their mission with spiritual nurture, retention, integration, and commitment objectives.

c. Congregational Habits

i. Roxburgh's 5 habits:<sup>198</sup>

1. Listening

a. To God, one another, and our neighbors

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<sup>195</sup> White, *Evangelism*, 351.

<sup>196</sup> The Seventh-day Adventist Church, "World Church: Growing in Christ, New Belief Statement, Voted."

<sup>197</sup> Roxburgh, *Joining God, Remaking Church, Changing the World*, v.

<sup>198</sup> Roxburgh, *Joining God, Remaking Church, Changing the World*, 56-57.

2. Discerning
  - a. Discovering where the Spirit is inviting
3. Testing
  - a. Take part in simple actions
4. Reflection
  - a. Gathering to ask...
  - b. What are we learning?
  - c. Where did we see God at work?
5. Deciding
  - a. Use previous stages to decide

IV. Overview: Stages of the New Member Experience<sup>199</sup>

- a. The new member begins at the passion stage. Ministry of churches could lead new members from their early passion to the stages of integration and commitment.

V. Conclusion

- a. Congregational habits can either reveal a loss of mission or display clarity of mission. Engaging in spiritual nurture is an opportunity for local churches to reconnect with the express mission of the church of nurture, retention and integration of newcomers.

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<sup>199</sup> Balvin, *A Practical Guide to Evangelism How to Win and Keep New Members*, 193-194.

**Appendix G**  
**WORKSHOP 2 GROUP EXERCISE**

**CHURCH BOARD AND ITS MEETINGS**

***Definition and Function***—Every church must have a functioning board whose members have been elected during a church business meeting.<sup>200</sup>

Included in church board responsibilities are:

**\*PLEASE NUMBER in order of importance\***

Oversight of church finances

Evangelism in all of its phases

Upholding of Christian standards

Coordination of church departments

Spiritual nurturing and mentoring of members

Protection and care of church properties

Recommending changes in church membership

An active discipleship plan

Maintenance of doctrinal purity

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<sup>200</sup> *Seventh-day Adventist Church Manual*, 129-130.



## **Appendix H**

### **WORKSHOP 2 QUESTIONNAIRE**

TOPIC: SPIRITUAL PRACTICES FOR NURTURE AND RETENTION PT. 1

Wednesday, October 24, 2018

**Question 1:** What insights did you gain today about how the church can be involved in spiritual nurture as a whole?

**Question 2:** What did you learn about spiritual practices today that will contribute to our work as a congregation to nurture new members?

**Question 3:** What excites you about the opportunity to put this form of nurture into practice?

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**This questionnaire is for non-paid volunteers who are participating in  
Pastor Richard Means, Jr.'s Doctor of Ministry Research**

## APPENDIX I

### OFFICIAL POSITION OF THE SEVENTH-DAY ADVENTIST CHURCH

#### CHURCH BOARD AND ITS MEETINGS<sup>201</sup>

***Definition and Function***—Every church must have a functioning board whose members have been elected during a church business meeting. Its chief concern is having an active discipleship plan in place, which includes both the spiritual nurture of the church and the work of planning and fostering evangelism.

Included in church board responsibilities are:

1. An active discipleship plan.
2. Evangelism in all of its phases.
3. Spiritual nurturing and mentoring of members.
4. Maintenance of doctrinal purity.
5. Upholding of Christian standards.
6. Recommending changes in church membership.
7. Oversight of church finances.
8. Protection and care of church properties.
9. Coordination of church departments.

The gospel commission of Jesus tells us that making disciples, which includes baptizing and teaching, is the primary function of the church (Matt. 28:18-20). It is, therefore, also the primary function of the board, which serves as the chief committee of the church. When the board devotes

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<sup>201</sup> *Seventh-day Adventist Church Manual*, 129-130.

its first interests and highest energies to involving every member in proclaiming the good news and making disciples, most problems are alleviated or prevented, and a strong, positive influence is felt in the spiritual life and growth of members.

***Spiritual Nurture***—Christ’s love for the Church needs to be manifested within the Church by His followers. True discipleship entails not only Biblical teaching (Matt. 28:20), but also a passionate commitment to loving our fellow believers unconditionally. This was the heart of Christ’s message to His disciples as He faced the cross (John 15:9-13). Christ’s command to them applies to us: that we “love one another.” Ellen G. White’s powerful insight into this historical scene is still vital for us: “This love is the evidence of their discipleship.”—DA 677, 678. Therefore, it is one of the primary functions of the board to ensure that members are nurtured and mentored in a personal, dynamic relationship with Jesus Christ.

***Discipleship***—The purpose of the Church as the body of Christ is to intentionally disciple members, so that they continue in an active and fruitful relationship with Christ and His Church. Discipleship is based on an ongoing, lifelong relationship with Jesus. The believer commits to “abiding in Christ” (John 15:8), to being trained for fruitful discipleship by sharing Jesus with others, as well as to leading other members to also be faithful disciples. The Church, individually and collectively, shares responsibility for ensuring that every church member remains part of the body of Christ.

**Appendix J**  
**WORKSHOP 3 OUTLINE**

Saturday, October 27, 2018

Topic: Spiritual Practices for Nurture and Retention, Pt. 2

Purpose: To identify specific ways in which congregations might nurture new believers.

Time Length: 60 minutes

**I. Understanding New Member Experience**

- a. Need for Nurture
  - i. Challenges internal, external, and situational
- b. Review: Braham Balvin's 5 Stages of the Member Experience.<sup>202</sup>
  - i. Passion- initial excitement
  - ii. Disillusionment- questioning of decision
  - iii. Acceptance- undeterred by imperfections
  - iv. Integration- actively involved in church life
  - v. Commitment- become fixture in faith community
- c. Post-decisional regret can interrupt integration and commitment<sup>203</sup>

**II. Key Strategies for Nurture and Retention**

- a. "Newcomers don't come with Velcro already applied. It's up to congregations to make them stick."— Carl Ratz <sup>204</sup>
- b. Small Group Strategy
  - i. Purpose of small groups
  - ii. Types of small groups

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<sup>202</sup> Balvin, *A Practical Guide to Evangelism How to Win and Keep New Members*, 193-194.

<sup>203</sup> Ansah, *Membership Retention*, 54.

<sup>204</sup> MacIntosh, *Beyond the First Visit*, Kindle loc. 1769.

1. Learning groups
    2. Fellowship groups
  - iii. Components of groups
    1. Love
    2. Learning
    3. Deciding
    4. Doing
- c. Friendship Strategy
  - i. Why friends are key
  - ii. Friendship ratio:
    1. Each new convert or new member should be able to identify at least seven friends in the church within the first six months.
    2. Over 80% of the people who visit church are looking for friendships. They will add a relationship with God is a church meets the need they feel for new friendships.

## II. Service Strategy

1. Service Environment
  1. create opportunities
  2. recruit
  3. appreciate
  4. train
  5. be inclusive
2. Places to Serve

Gary MacIntosh in the book *Beyond the First Visit* says, “Opportunities for involvement must continue to be presented, but never forced.”<sup>205</sup>

### III. Conclusions

- a. Robert Logan says, assimilation takes place naturally when new people are “able to develop friends in your church, join a group or class and become involved in serving others. As you encourage them to find their own place of service in your group, they will be assimilated into the life of your church.”<sup>206</sup>
- b. Logan explains here that service is a key component along with friendship and small groups in integrating new members into the overall life of the church.

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<sup>205</sup> MacIntosh, *Beyond the First Visit*, Kindle loc. 2360.

<sup>206</sup> Logan, *Mobilizing for Compassion: Moving People into Ministry*, Kindle loc. 1383.

**Appendix K**  
**WORKSHOP 3 QUESTIONNAIRE**

Saturday, October 27, 2018

**Question 1:** Based on the sermon series and the workshops that you've heard, what has inspired you most?

**Question 2:** How have the content, ideas or insights been helpful to you?

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